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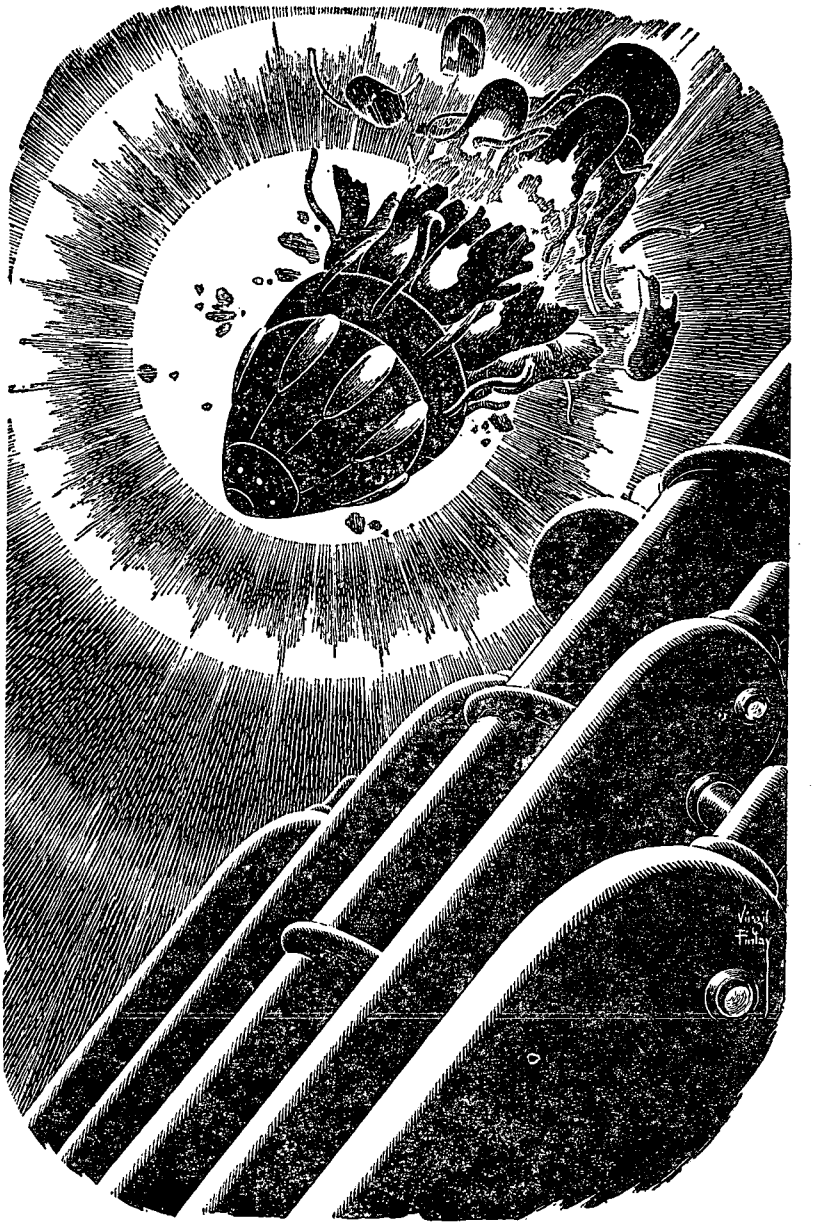

A QUESTION OF COURAGE
By J. F. Bone

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EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

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GREENSLAVES

By FRANK HERBERT

From the jungle came a new sort of being . . . but only by coming face to face—face?—with it could man know whether it was friend or foe.

HE looked pretty much like the bastard offspring of a Gurrani Indio and some backwoods farmer's daughter, some *sertanista* who had tried to forget her enslavement to the *encomendero* system by "eating the iron"—which is what they call lovemaking through the grill of a consel gate.

The type-look was almost perfect except when he forgot himself while passing through one of the deeper jungle glades.

His skin tended to shade down to green then, fading him into the background of leaves and vines, giving a strange disembodiment to the mud-grey shirt and ragged trousers, the inevitable frayed straw hat and rawhide sandals soled with pieces cut from worn tires.

Such lapses became less and less frequent the farther he got from the Parana headwaters, the *sertao* hinterland of Goyaz where men with his bang-cut black hair and glittering dark eyes were common.

By the time he reached *bandeirantes* country, he had achieved almost perfect control over the chameleon effect.

But now he was out of the jungle growth and into the brown dirt tracks that separated the parceled farms of the resettlement plan. In his own way, he knew he was approaching the *bandeirante* checkpoints, and with an almost human gesture, he fingered the *cedula de gracias al sacar*, the certificate of white blood, tucked safely beneath his shirt. Now and again, when humans were not near, he practiced speaking aloud the name that had been chosen for him—"Antonio Raposo Tavares."

The sound was a bit stridulant, harsh on the edges, but he knew

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it would pass. It already had. Goyaz Indios were notorious for the strange inflection of their speech. The farm folk who had given him a roof and fed him the previous night had said as much.

When their questions had become pressing, he had squatted on the doorstep and played his flute, the *qena* of the Andes Indian that he carried in a leather purse hung from his shoulder. He had kept the sound to a conventional, non-dangerous pitch. The gesture of the flute was a symbol of the region. When a Guarani put flute to nose and began playing, that was a sign words were ended.

The farm folk had shrugged and retired.

Now, he could see red-brown rooftops ahead and the white crystal shimmering of a *bandeirante* tower with its aircars alighting and departing. The scene held an odd hive-look. He stopped, finding himself momentarily overcome by the touch of instincts that he knew he had to master or fail in the ordeal to come.

He united his mental identity then, thinking, *We are greenslaves subservient to the greater whole.* The thought lent him an air of servility that was like a shield against the stares of the humans trudging past all around him. His kind knew many mannerisms and had learned early that servility was a form of concealment.

Presently, he resumed his plodding course toward the town and the tower.

The dirt track gave way to a two-lane paved market road with its footpaths in the ditches on both sides. This, in turn, curved alongside a four-deck commercial transport highway where even the footpaths were paved. And now there were groundcars and aircars in greater number, and he noted that the flow of people on foot was increasing.

Thus far, he had attracted no dangerous attention. The occasional snickering side-glance from natives of the area could be safely ignored, he knew. Probing stares held peril, and he had detected none. The servility shielded him.

THE sun was well along toward mid-morning and the day's heat was beginning to press down on the earth, raising a moist hothouse stink from the dirt beside the pathway, mingling the perspiration odors of humanity around him.

And they were around him now, close and pressing, moving slower and slower as they approached the checkpoint bottleneck. Presently, the forward motion stopped. Progress resolved itself into shuffle and stop, shuffle and stop.

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This was the critical test now and there was no avoiding it. He waited with something like an Indian's stoic patience. His breathing had grown deeper to compensate for the heat, and he adjusted it to match that of the people around him, suffering the temperature rise for the sake of blending into his surroundings.

Andes Indians didn't breathe deeply here in the lowlands.

Shuffle and stop.

Shuffle and stop.

He could see the checkpoint now.

Fastidious bandeirantes in sealed white cloaks with plastic helmets, gloves and boots stood in a double row within a shaded brick corridor leading into the town. He could see sunlight hot on the street beyond the corridor and people hurrying away there after passing the gantlet.

The sight of that free area beyond the corridor sent an ache of longing through all the parts of him. The suppression warning flashed out instantly on the heels of that instinctive reaching emotion.

No distraction could be permitted now; he was into the hands of the first bandeirante, a hulking blonde fellow with pink skin and blue eyes.

"Step along now! Lively now!" the fellow said.

A gloved hand propelled him toward two bandeirantes standing on the right side of the line.

"Give this one an extra treatment," the blonde giant called. "He's from the upcountry by the look of him."

The other two bandeirantes had him now, one jamming a breather mask over his face, the other fitting a plastic bag over him. A tube trailed from the bag out to machinery somewhere in the street beyond the corridor.

"Double shot!" one of the bandeirantes called.

Fuming blue gas puffed out the bag around him, and he took a sharp, gasping breath through the mask.

Agony!

The gas drove through every multiple linkage of his being with needles of pain.

We must not weaken, he thought.

But it was a deadly pain, killing. The linkages were beginning to weaken.

"Okay on this one," the bag handler called.

The mask was pulled away. The bag was slipped off. Hands propelled him down the corridor toward the sunlight.

"Lively now! Don't hold up the line."

The stink of the poison gas was all around him. It was a new one—a dissembler. They hadn't prepared him for this poison!

Now, he was into the sunlight and turning down a street lined

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with fruit stalls, merchants bartering with customers or standing fat and watchful behind their displays.

In his extremity, the fruit beckoned to him with the promise of life-saving sanctuary for a few parts of him, but the integrating totality fought off the lure. He shuffled as fast as he dared, dodging past the customers, through the knots of idlers.

"You like to buy some fresh oranges?"

An oily dark hand thrust two oranges toward his face.

"Fresh oranges from the green country. Never been a bug anywhere near these."

He avoided the hand, although the odor of the oranges came near overpowering him.

Now, he was clear of the stalls, around a corner down a narrow side street. Another corner and he saw far away to his left, the lure of greenery in open country, the free area beyond the town.

He turned toward the green, increasing his speed, measuring out the time still available to him. There was still a chance. Poison clung to his clothing, but free air was filtering through the fabric —and the thought of victory was like an antidote.

We can make it yet!

THE green drew closer and closer—trees and ferns beside a river bank. He heard the running water. There was a bridge thronging with foot traffic from converging streets.

No help for it: he joined the throng, avoided contact as much as possible. The linkages of his legs and back were beginning to go, and he knew the wrong kind of blow could dislodge whole segments. He was over the bridge without disaster. A dirt track led off the path and down toward the river.

He turned toward it, stumbled against one of two men carrying a pig in a net slung between them. Part of the shell on his right upper leg gave way and he could feel it begin to slip down inside his pants.

The man he had hit took two backward steps, almost dropped the end of the burden.

"Careful!" the man shouted.

The man at the other end of the net said: "Damn' drunks."

The pig set up a squirming, squealing distraction.

In this moment, he slipped past them onto the dirt track leading down toward the river. He could see the water down there now, boiling with aeration from the barrier filters.

Behind him, one of the pig carriers said: "I don't think he was drunk, Carlos. His skin felt dry and hot. Maybe he was sick."

The track turned around an embankment of raw dirt dark brown with dampness and dipped

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toward a tunnel through ferns and bushes. The men with the pig could no longer see him, he knew, and he grabbed at his pants where the part of his leg was slipping, scurried into the green tunnel.

Now, he caught sight of his first mutated bee. It was dead, having entered the barrier vibration area here without any protection against that deadliness. The bee was one of the butterfly type with iridescent yellow and orange wings. It lay in the cup of a green leaf at the center of a shaft of sunlight.

He shuffled past, having recorded the bee's shape and color. They had considered the bees as a possible answer, but there were serious drawbacks to this course. A bee could not reason with humans, that was the key fact. And humans had to listen to reason soon, else all life would end.

There came the sound of someone hurrying down the path behind him, heavy footsteps thudding on the earth.

Pursuit?....

He was reduced to a slow shuffling now and soon it would be only crawling progress, he knew. Eyes searched the greenery around him for a place of concealment. A thin break in the fern wall on his left caught his attention. Tiny human footprints led into it—children. He forced his way through the ferns, found himself on a low narrow path along the embankment. Two toy aircars, red and blue, had been abandoned on the path. His staggering foot pressed them into the dirt.

The path led close to a wall of black dirt festooned with creepers, around a sharp turn and onto the lip of a shallow cave. More toys lay in the green gloom at the cave's mouth.

He knelt, crawled over the toys into the blessed dankness, lay there a moment, waiting.

The pounding footsteps hurried past a few feet below.

Voices reached up to him.

"He was headed toward the river. Think he was going to jump in?"

"Who knows? But I think me for sure he was sick."

"Here; down this way. Somebody's been down this way."

The voices grew indistinct, blended with the bubbling sound of the river.

THE men were going on down the path. They had missed his hiding place. But why had they pursued him? He had not seriously injured the one by stumbling against him. Surely, they did not suspect.

Slowly, he steeled himself for what had to be done, brought his specialized parts into play and began burrowing into the earth at the end of the cave. Deeper and

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deeper he burrowed, thrusting the excess dirt behind and out to make it appear the cave had collapsed.

Ten meters in he went before stopping. His store of energy contained just enough reserve for the next stage. He turned on his back, scattering the dead parts of his legs and back, exposing the queen and her guard cluster to the dirt beneath his chitinous spine. Orifices opened at his thighs, exuded the cocoon foam, the soothing green cover that would harden into a protective shell.

This was victory; the essential parts had survived.

Time was the thing now—ten and one half days to gather new energy, go through the metamorphosis and disperse. Soon, there would be thousands of him—each with its carefully mimicked clothing and identification papers and appearance of humanity.

Identical—each of them.

There would be other checkpoints, but not as severe; other barriers, lesser ones.

This human copy had proved a good one. They had learned many things from study of their scattered captives and from the odd crew directed by the red-haired human female they'd trapped in the *sertao*. How strange she was: like a queen and not like a queen. It was so difficult to understand human creatures, even when you permitted them limited freedom . . . almost impossible to reason with them. Their slavery to the planet would have to be proved dramatically, perhaps.

The queen stirred near the cool dirt. They had learned new things this time about escaping notice. All of the subsequent colony clusters would share that knowledge. One of them—at least—would get through to the city by the Amazon "River Sea" where the death-for-all originated. One had to get through.

SENHOR Gabriel Martinho, prefect of the Mato Grosso Barrier Compact, paced his study, muttering to himself as he passed the tall, narrow window that admitted the evening sunlight. Occasionally, he paused to glare down at his son, Joao, who sat on a tapir-leather sofa beneath one of the tall bookcases that lined the room.

The elder Martinho was a dark wisp of a man, limb thin, with grey hair and cavernous brown eyes above an eagle nose, slit mouth and boot-toe chin. He wore old style black clothing as befitted his position, his linen white against the black, and with golden cuffstuds glittering as he waved his arms.

"I am an object of ridicule!" he snarled.

Joao, a younger copy of the fa-

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ther, his hair still black and wavy, absorbed the statement in silence. He wore a bandeirante's white coverall suit sealed into plastic boots at the calf.

"An object of ridicule!" the elder Martinho repeated.

It began to grow dark in the room, the quick tropic darkness hurried by thunderheads piled along the horizon. The waning daylight carried a hazed blue cast. Heat lightning spattered the patch of sky visible through the tall window, sent dazzling electric radiance into the study. Drumming thunder followed. As though that were the signal, the house sensors turned on lights wherever there were humans. Yellow illumination filled the study.

The Prefect stopped in front of his son. "Why does my own son, a bandeirante, a jefe of the Irmandades, spout these Carsonite stupidities?"

Joao looked at the floor between his boots. He felt both resentment and shame. To disturb his father this way, that was a hurtful thing, with the elder Martinho's delicate heart. But the old man was so blind!

"Those rabble farmers laughed at me," the elder Martinho said. "I told them we'd increase the green area by ten thousand hectares this month, and they laughed. 'Your own son does not even believe this!' they said. And they told me some of the things you had been saying."

"I am sorry I have caused you distress, father," Joao said. "The fact that I'm a bandeirante . . ." He shrugged. "How else could I have learned the truth about this extermination program?"

His father quivered.

"Joao! Do you sit there and tell me you took a false oath when you formed your Irmandades band?"

"That's not the way it was, father."

Joao pulled a sprayman's emblem from his breast pocket, fingered it. "I believed it . . . then. We could shape mutated bees to fill every gap in the insect ecology. This I believed. Like the Chinese, I said: 'Only the useful shall live!' But that was several years ago, father, and since then I have come to realize we don't have a complete understanding of what usefulness means."

"It was a mistake to have you educated in North America," his father said. "That's where you absorbed this Carsonite heresy. It's all well and good for *them* to refuse to join the rest of the world in the Ecological Realignment; they do not have as many million mouths to feed. But my own son!"

Joao spoke defensively: "Out in the red areas you see things, father. These things are difficult to explain. Plants look healthier

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out there and the fruit is . . ."

"A purely temporary thing," his father said. "We will shape bees to meet whatever need we find. The destroyers take food from our mouths. It is very simple. They must die and be replaced by creatures which serve a function useful to mankind."

"The birds are dying, father," Joao said.

"We are saving the birds! We have specimens of every kind in our sanctuaries. We will provide new foods for them to . . ."

"But what happens if our barriers are breached . . . before we can replace the population of natural predators? What happens then?"

THE elder Martinho shook a thin finger under his son's nose. "This is nonsense! I will hear no more of it! Do you know what else those *mameluco* farmers said? They said they have seen bandeirantes reinfesting the green areas to prolong their jobs! That is what they said. This, too, is nonsense—but it is a natural consequence of defeatist talk just such as I have heard from you tonight. And every setback we suffer adds strength to such charges'!'

"Setbacks, father?"

"I have said it: setbacks!"

Senhor Prefect Martinho turned, paced to his desk and back. Again, he stopped in front of his son, placed hands on hips. "You refer to the Piratininga, of course?"

"You accuse me, father?"

"Your Irmandades were on that line."

"Not so much as a flea got through us!"

"Yet, a week ago the Piratininga was green. Now, it is crawling. Crawling!"

"I cannot watch every bandeirante in the Mato Grosso," Joao protested. "If they . . ."

"The IEO gives us only six months to clean up," the elder Martinho said. He raised his hands, palms up; his face was flushed. "Six months! Then they throw an embargo around all Brazil—the way they have done with North America." He lowered his hands. "Can you imagine the pressures on me? Can you imagine the things I must listen to about the bandeirantes and especially about my own son?"

Joao scratched his chin with the sprayman's emblem. The reference to the International Ecological Organization made him think of Dr. Rhin Kelly, the IEO's lovely field director. His mind pictured her as he had last seen her in the A' Chigua nightclub at Bahia—red-haired, green-eyed . . . so lovely and strange. But she had been missing almost six weeks now—somewhere in the *sertao*, and there were those who said she must be dead.

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Joao looked at his father. If only the old man weren't so excitable. "You excite yourself needlessly, father," he said. "The Piratininga was not a full barrier, just a . . ."

"Excite myself!"

The Prefect's nostrils dilated; he bent toward his son. "Already we have gone past two deadlines. We gained an extension when I announced you and the Bandeirantes of Diogo Alvarez had cleared the Piratininga. How do I explain now that it is reinfested, that we have the work to do over?"

Joao returned the sprayman's emblem to his pocket. It was obvious he'd not be able to reason with his father this night. Frustration sent a nerve quivering along Joao's jaw. The old man had to be told, though; someone had to tell him. And someone of his father's stature had to get back to the Bureau, shake them up there and make *them* listen.

The Prefect returned to his desk, sat down. He picked up an antique crucifix, one that the great Aleihadinho had carved in ivory. He lifted it, obviously seeking to restore his serenity, but his eyes went wide and glaring. Slowly, he returned the crucifix to its position on the desk, keeping his attention on it.

"Joao," he whispered.

It's his heart! Joao thought. He leaped to his feet, rushed to his father's side. "Father! What is it?"

The elder Martinho pointed, hand trembling.

THROUGH the spiked crown of thorns, across the agonized ivory face, over the straining muscles of the Christ figure crawled an insect. It was the color of the ivory, faintly reminiscent of a beetle in shape, but with a multi-clawed fringe along its wings and thorax, and with furry edging to its abnormally long antennae.

The elder Martinho reached for a roll of papers to smash the insect, but Joao put out a hand restraining him. "Wait. This is a new one. I've never seen anything like it. Give me a handlight. We must follow it, find where it nests."

Senhor Prefect Martinho muttered under his breath, withdrew a small permalight from a drawer of the desk, handed the light to his son.

Joao peered at the insect, still not using the light. "How strange it is," he said. "See how it exactly matches the tone of the ivory."

The insect stopped, pointed its antennae toward the two men.

"Things have been seen," Joao said. "There are stories. Something like this was found near one of the barrier villages last month. It was inside the green

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area, on a path beside a river. Two farmers found it while searching for a sick man." Joao looked at his father. "They are very watchful of sickness in the newly green regions, you know. There have been epidemics . . . and that is another thing."

"There is no relationship," his father snapped. "Without insects to carry disease, we will have less illness."

"Perhaps," Joao said, and his tone said he did not believe it.

Joao returned his attention to the insect. "I do not think our ecologists know all they say they do. And I mistrust our Chinese advisors. They speak in such flowery terms of the benefits from eliminating useless insects, but they will not let us go into their green areas and inspect. Excuses. Always excuses. I think they are having troubles they do not wish us to know."

"That's foolishness," the elder Martinho growled, but his tone said this was not a position he cared to defend. "They are honorable men. Their way of life is closer to our socialism than it is to the decadent capitalism of North America. Your trouble is you see them too much through the eyes of those who educated you."

"I'll wager this insect is one of the spontaneous mutations," Joao said. "It is almost as though they appeared according to some plan. Find me something in which I may capture this creature and take it to the laboratory."

The elder Martinho remained standing by his chair. "Where will you say it was found?"

"Right here," Joao said.

"You will not hesitate to expose me to more ridicule?"

"But father . . ."

"Can't you hear what they will say? In his own home this insect is found. It is a strange new kind. Perhaps he breeds them there to reinfest the green."

"Now *you* are talking nonsense, father. Mutations are common in a threatened species. And we cannot deny there is threat to insect species—the poisons, the barrier vibrations, the traps. Get me a container, father. I cannot leave this creature, or I'd get a container myself."

"And you will tell where it was found?"

"I can do nothing else. We must cordon off this area, search it out. This could be . . . an accident . . ."

"Or a deliberate attempt to embarrass me."

JOAO took his attention from the insect, studied his father. *That* was a possibility, of course. The Carsonites had friends in many places . . . and some were fanatics who would stoop to any scheme. Still . . .

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Decision came to Joao. He returned his attention to the motionless insect. His father had to be told, had to be reasoned with at any cost. Someone whose voice carried authority had to get down to the Capitol and make them listen.

"Our earliest poisons killed off the weak and selected out those insects immune to this threat," Joao said. "Only the immune remained to breed. The poisons we use now . . . some of them, do not leave such loopholes and the deadly vibrations at the barriers . . ." He shrugged. "This is a form of beetle, father. I will show you a thing."

Joao drew a long, thin whistle of shiny metal from his pocket. "There was a time when this called countless beetles to their deaths. I had merely to tune it across their attraction spectrum." He put the whistle to his lips, blew while turning the end of it.

No sound audible to human ears came from the instrument, but the beetle's antennae writhed.

Joao removed the whistle from his mouth.

The antennae stopped writhing.

"It stayed put, you see," Joao said. "And there are indications of malignant intelligence among them. The insects are far from extinction, father . . . and they are beginning to strike back."

"Malignant intelligence, pah!"

"You must believe me, father," Joao said. "No one else will listen. They laugh and say we are too long in the jungle. And where is our evidence? And they say such stories could be expected from ignorant farmers but not from bandeirantes. You must listen, father, and believe. It is why I was chosen to come here . . . because you are my father and you might listen to your own son."

"Believe what?" the elder Martinho demanded, and he was the Prefect now, standing erect, glaring coldly at his son.

"In the sertao of Goyaz last week," Joao said, "Antonil Lisboa's bandeirante lost three men who . . ."

"Accidents."

"They were killed with formic acid and oil of copahu."

"They were careless with their poisons. Men grow careless when they . . ."

"Father! The formic acid was a particularly strong type, but still recognizable as having been . . . or being of a type manufactured by insects. And the men were drenched with it. While the oil of copahu . . ."

"You imply that insects such as this . . ." The Prefect pointed to the motionless creature on the crucifix. ". . . blind creatures such as this . . ."

"They're not blind, father."

"I did not mean literally blind,

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but without intelligence," the elder Martinho said. "You cannot be seriously implying that these creatures attacked humans and killed them."

"We have yet to discover precisely how the men were slain," Joao said. "We have only their bodies and the physical evidence at the scene. But there have been other deaths, father, and men missing and we grow more and more certain that . . ."

He broke off as the beetle crawled off the crucifix onto the desk. Immediately, it darkened to brown, blending with the wood surface.

"Please, father. Get me a container."

The beetle reached the edge of the desk, hesitated. Its antennae curled back, then forward.

"I will get you a container only if you promise to use discretion in your story of where this creature was found," the Prefect said.

"Father, I . . ."

THE beetle leaped off the desk far out into the middle of the room, scuttled to the wall, up the wall, into a crack beside a window.

Joao pressed the switch of the handlight, directed its beam into the hole which had swallowed the strange beetle.

"How long has this hole been here, father?"

"For years. It was a flaw in the masonry . . . an earthquake, I believe."

Joao turned, crossed to the door in three strides, went through an arched hallway, down a flight of stone steps, through another door and short hall, through a grillwork gate and into the exterior garden. He set the handlight to full intensity, washed its blue glare over the wall beneath the study window.

"Joao, what are you doing?"

"My job, father," Joao said. He glanced back, saw that the elder Martinho had stopped just outside the gate.

Joao returned his attention to the exterior wall, washed the blue glare of light on the stones beneath the window. He crouched low, running the light along the ground, peering behind each clod, erasing all shadows.

His searching scrutiny passed over the raw earth, turned to the bushes, then the lawn.

Joao heard his father come up behind.

"Do you see it, son?"

"No, father."

"You should have allowed me to crush it."

From the outer garden that bordered the road and the stone fence, there came a piercing stridulation. It hung on the air in almost tangible waves, making Joao think of the hunting cry of jungle predators. A shiver

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moved up his spine. He turned toward the driveway where he had parked his airtruck, sent the blue glare of light stabbing there.

He broke off, staring at the lawn. "What is that?"

The ground appeared to be in motion, reaching out toward them like the curling of a wave on a beach. Already, they were cut off from the house. The wave was still some ten paces away, but moving in rapidly.

Joao stood up, clutched his father's arm. He spoke quietly, hoping not to alarm the old man further. "We must get to my truck, father. We must run across them."

"Them?"

"Those are like the insect we saw inside, father—millions of them. Perhaps they are not beetles, after all. Perhaps they are like army ants. We must make it to the truck. I have equipment and supplies there. We will be safe inside. It is a bandeirante truck, father. You must run with me. I will help you."

They began to run, Joao holding his father's arm, pointing the way with the light.

Let his heart be strong enough, Joao prayed.

They were into the creeping wave of insects then, but the creatures leaped aside, opening a pathway which closed behind the running men.

The white form of the airtruck loomed out of the shadows at the far curve of the driveway about fifteen meters ahead.

"Joao . . . my heart," the elder Martinho gasped.

"You can make it," Joao panted. "Faster!" He almost lifted his father from the ground for the last few paces.

THEY were at the wide rear door into the truck's lab compartment now. Joao yanked open the door, slapped the light switch, reached for a spray hood and poison gun. He stopped, stared into the yellow-lighted compartment.

Two men sat there—sertao Indians by the look of them, with bright glaring eyes and bang-cut black hair beneath straw hats. They looked to be identical twins—even to the mud-grey clothing and sandals, the leather shoulder bags. The beetle-like insects crawled around them, up the walls, over the instruments and vials.

"What the devil?" Joao blurted.

One of the pair held a qena flute. He gestured with it, spoke in a rasping, oddly inflected voice: "Enter. You will not be harmed if you obey."

Joao felt his father sag, caught the old man in his arms. How light he felt! Joao stepped up into the truck, carrying his fa-

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ther. The elder Martinho breathed in short, painful gasps. His face was a pale blue and sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Joao," he whispered. "Pain . . . my chest."

"Medicine, father," Joao said. "Where is your medicine."

"House," the old man said.

"It appears to be dying," one of the Indians rasped.

Still holding his father in his arms, Joao whirled toward the pair, blazed: "I don't know who you are or why you loosed those bugs here, but my father's dying and needs help. Get out of my way!"

"Obey or both die," said the Indian with the flute.

"He needs his medicine and a doctor," Joao pleaded. He didn't like the way the Indian pointed that flute. The motion suggested the instrument was actually a weapon.

"What part has failed?" asked the other Indian. He stared curiously at Joao's father. The old man's breathing had become shallow and rapid.

"It's his heart," Joao said. "I know you farmers don't think he's acted fast enough for . . ."

"Not farmers," said the one with the flute. "Heart?"

"Pump," said the other.

"Pump." The Indian with the flute stood up from the bench at the front of the lab, gestured down. "Put . . . father here."

The other one got off the bench, stood aside.

In spite of fear for his father, Joao was caught by the strange look of this pair, the fine, scale-like lines in their skin, the glittering brilliance of their eyes.

"Put father here," repeated the one with the flute, pointing at the bench. "Help can be . . ."

"Attained," said the other one.

"Attained," said the one with the flute.

Joao focused now on the masses of insects around the walls, the waiting quietude in their ranks. They *were* like the one in the study.

The old man's breathing was now very shallow, very rapid.

He's dying, Joao thought in desperation.

"Help can be attained," repeated the one with the flute. "If you obey, we will not harm."

The Indian lifted his flute, pointed it at Joao like a weapon. "Obey."

There was no mistaking the gesture.

Slowly, Joao advanced, deposited his father gently on the bench.

THE other Indian bent over the elder Martinho's head, raised an eyelid. There was a professional directness about the gesture. The Indian pushed gently on the dying man's diaphragm, removed the Prefect's belt, loos-

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ened his collar. A stubby brown finger was placed against the artery in the old man's neck.

"Very weak," the Indian rasped.

Joao took another, closer look at this Indian, wondering at a sertao backwoodsman who behaved like a doctor.

"We've got to get him to a hospital," Joao said. "And his medicine in . . ."

"Hospital," the Indian agreed.

"Hospital?" asked the one with the flute.

A low, stridulant hissing came from the other Indian.

"Hospital," said the one with the flute.

That stridulant hissing! Joao stared at the Indian beside the Prefect. The sound had been reminescent of the weird call that had echoed across the lawn.

The one with the flute poked him, said: "You will go into front and maneuver this . . ."

"Vehicle," said the one beside Joao's father.

"Vehicle," said the one with the flute.

"Hospital?" Joao pleaded.

"Hospital," agreed the one with the flute.

Joao looked once more to his father. The other Indian already was strapping the elder Martinho to the bench in preparation for movement. How competent the man appeared in spite of his backwoods look.

"Obey," said the one with the flute.

Joao opened the door into the front compartment, slipped through, feeling the other one follow. A few drops of rain spattered darkly against the curved windshield. Joao squeezed into the operator's seat, noted how the Indian crouched behind him, flute pointed and ready.

A dark gun of some kind, Joao guessed.

He punched the igniter buttor on the dash, strapped himself in while waiting for the turbines to build up speed. The Indian still crouched behind him, vulnerable now if the airtruck were spun sharply. Joao flicked the communications switch on the lower left corner of the dash, looked into the tiny screen there giving him a view of the lab compartment. The rear doors were open. He closed them by hydraulic remote. His father was securely strapped to the bench now, Joao noted, but the other Indian was equally secured.

The turbines reached their whining peak. Joao switched on the lights, engaged the hydrostatic drive. The truck lifted six inches, angled upward as Joao increased pump displacement. He turned left onto the street, lifted another two meters to increase speed, headed toward the lights of a boulevard.

The Indian spoke beside his

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ear: "You will turn toward the mountain over there." A hand came forward, pointing to the right.

The Alejandro Clinic is there in the foothills, Joao thought.

He made the indicated turn down a cross street angling toward the boulevard.

Casually, he gave pump displacement another boost, lifted another meter and increased speed once more. In the same motion, he switched on the intercom to the rear compartment, tuned for the spare amplifier and pickup in the compartment beneath the bench where his father lay.

The pickup, capable of making a dropped pin sound like a cannon, gave forth only a distant hissing and rasping. Joao increased amplification. The instrument should have been transmitting the old man's heartbeats now, sending a noticeable drum-thump into the forward cabin.

There was nothing.

Tears blurred Joao's eyes, and he shook his head to clear them.

My father is dead, he thought. *Killed by these crazy backwoodsmen.*

HE noted in the dash screen that the Indian back there had a hand under the elder Martinho's back. The Indian appeared to be massaging the dead man's back, and a rhythmic rasping matched the motion.

Anger filled Joao. He felt like diving the airtruck into an abutment, dying himself to kill these crazy men.

They were approaching the outskirts of the city, and ring-girders circled off to the left giving access to the boulevard. This was an area of small gardens and cottages protected by over-fly canopies.

Joao lifted the airtruck above the canopies, headed toward the boulevard.

To the clinic, yes, he thought. *But it is too late.*

In that instant, he realized there were no heartbeats at all coming from that rear compartment—only that slow, rhythmic grating, a faint susuration and a cicada-like hum up and down scale.

"To the mountains, there," said the Indian behind him.

Again, the hand came forward to point off to the right.

Joao, with that hand close to his eyes and illuminated by the dash, saw the scale-like parts of a finger shift position slightly. In that shift, he recognized the scale-shapes by their claw fringes.

The beetles!

The finger was composed of linked beetles working in unison!

Joao turned, stared into the *Indian's* eyes, seeing now why they glistened so: they were composed of thousands of tiny facets.

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"Hospital, there," the creature beside him said, pointing.

Joao turned back to the controls, fighting to keep from losing composure. They were not Indians . . . they weren't even human. They were insects—some kind of hive-cluster shaped and organized to mimic a man.

The implications of this discovery raced through his mind. How did they support their weight? How did they feed and breathe?

How did they speak?

Everything had to be subordinated to the urgency of getting this information and proof of it back to one of the big labs where the facts could be explored.

Even the death of his father could not be considered now. He had to capture one of these things, get out with it.

He reached overhead, flicked on the command transmitter, set its beacon for a homing call. *Let some of my Irmaos be awake and monitoring their sets,* he prayed.

"More to the right," said the creature behind him.

Again, Joao corrected course.

The moon was high overhead now, illuminating a line of bandeirante towers off to the left. The first barrier.

They would be out of the green area soon and into the grey—then, beyond that, another barrier and the great red that stretched out in reaching fingers through the Goyaz and the Mato Grosso. Joao could see scattered lights of Resettlement Plan farms ahead, and darkness beyond.

The airtruck was going faster than he wanted, but Joao dared not slow it. They might become suspicious.

"You must go higher," said the creature behind him.

Joao increased pump displacement, raised the nose. He levelled off at three hundred meters.

MORE bandeirante towers loomed ahead, spaced at closer intervals. Joao picked up the barrier signals on his meters, looked back at the *Indian.* The dissembler vibrations seemed not to affect the creature.

Joao looked out his side window and down. No one would challenge him, he knew. This was a bandeirante airtruck headed *into* the red zone . . . and with its transmitter sending out a homing call. The men down there would assume he was a band leader headed out on a contract after a successful bid—and calling his men to him for the job ahead.

He could see the moon-silvered snake of the Sao Francisco winding off to his left, and the lesser waterways like threads ravelled out of the foothills.

I must find the nest—where we're headed, Joao thought. He wondered if he dared turn on his receiver—but if his men started

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reporting in . . . No. That could make the creatures suspect; they might take violent counter-action.

My men will realize something is wrong when I don't answer, he thought. *They will follow.*

If any of them hear my call.

Hours droned past.

Nothing but moonlighted jungle sped beneath them now, and the moon was low on the horizon, near setting. This was the deep red region where broadcast poisons had been used at first with disastrous results. This was where the wild mutations had originated. It was here that Rhin Kelly had been reported missing.

This was the region being saved for the final assault, using a mobile barrier line when that line could be made short enough.

Joao armed the emergency charge that would separate the front and rear compartments of the truck when he fired it. The stub wings of the front compartment and its emergency rocket motors could get him back into bandeirante country.

With the *specimen* sitting behind him safely subdued, Joao hoped.

He looked up through the canopy, scanned the horizon as far as he could. Was that moonlight glistening on a truck far back to the right? He couldn't be sure.

"How much farther?" Joao asked.

"Ahead," the creature rasped.

Now that he was alert for it, Joao heard the modulated stridulation beneath that voice.

"But how long?" Joao asked. "My father . . ."

"Hospital for . . . the father . . . ahead," said the creature.

It would be dawn soon, Joao realized. He could see the first false line of light along the horizon behind. This night had passed so swiftly. Joao wondered if these creatures had injected some time-distorting drug into him without his knowing. He thought not. He was maintaining himself in the necessities of the moment. There was no time for fatigue or boredom when he had to record every landmark half-visible in the night, sense everything there was to sense about these creatures with him.

How did they coordinate all those separate parts?

They appeared conscious. Was that mimicry, too? What did they use for a brain?

DAWN came, revealing the plateau of the Mato Grosso. Joao looked out his windows. This region, he knew, stretched across five degrees of latitude and six degrees of longitude. Once, it has been a region of isolated *fazendas* farmed by independent blacks and by *sertanistos* chained to the *encomendero* plantation system. It was hard-

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wood jungles, narrow rivers with banks overgrown by lush trees and ferns, savannahs and tangled life.

Even in this age it remained primitive, a fact blamed largely on insects and disease. It was one of the last strongholds of *teeming* insect life, if the International Ecological Organization's reports could be believed.

Supplies for the bandeirantes making the assault on this insect stronghold would come by way of Sao Paulo, by air and by transport on the multi-decked highways, then on antique deisel trains to Itapira, on river runners to Bahus and by airtruck to Registo and Leopoldina on the Araguaya.

This area crawled with insects: wire worms in the roots of the savannahs, grubs digging in the moist black earth, hopping beetles, dart-like angita wasps, chalcis flies, chiggers, sphecidae, braconidae, fierce hornets, white termites, hemipteric crawlers, blood roaches, thrips, ants, lice, mosquitoes, mites, moths, exotic butterflies, mantidae—and countless unnatural mutations of them all.

This would be an expensive fight—unless it were stopped . . . because it already had been lost.

I mustn't think that way, Joao told himself. *Out of respect for my father.*

Maps of the IEO showed this region in varied intensities of red. Around the red ran a ring of grey with pink shading where one or two persistent forms of insect life resisted man's poisons, jelly flames, astringents, sonitoxics—the combination of flamant couroq and supersonics that drove insects from their hiding places into waiting death—and all the mechanical traps and lures in the bandeirante arsenal.

A grid map would be placed over this area and each thousand-acre square offered for bid to the independent bands to deinfest.

We bandeirantes are a kind of ultimate predator, Joao thought. *It's no wonder these creatures mimic us.*

But how good, really, was the mimicry? he asked himself. And how deadly to the predators?

"There," said the creature behind him, and the multi-part hand came forward to point toward a black scarp visible ahead in the grey light of morning.

Joao's foot kicked a trigger on the floor releasing a great cloud of orange dye-fog beneath the truck to mark the ground and forest for a mile around under this spot. As he kicked the trigger, Joao began counting down the five-second delay to the firing of the separation charge.

It came in a roaring blast that Joao knew would smear the creature behind him against the rear

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bulkhead. He sent the stub wings out, fed power to the rocket motors and back hard around. He saw the detached rear compartment settling slowly earthward above the dye cloud, its fall cushioned as the pumps of the hydrostatic drive automatically compensated.

I will come back, father, Joao thought. *You will be buried among family and friends.*

He locked the controls, twisted in the seat to see what had happened to his captive.

A gasp escaped Joao's lips.

THE rear bulkhead crawled with insects clustered around something white and pulsing. The mud-grey shirt and trousers were torn, but insects already were repairing it, spinning out fibers that meshed and sealed on contact. There was a yellow sac-like extrusion near the pulsing white, and a dark brown skeleton with familiar articulation.

It looked like a human skeleton —but chitinous.

Before his eyes, the thing was reassembling itself, the long, furry antennae burrowing into the structure and interlocking.

The flute-weapon was not visible, and the thing's leather pouch had been thrown into a rear corner, but its eyes were in place in their brown sockets, staring at him. The mouth was reforming.

The yellow sac contracted, and a voice issued from the half-formed mouth.

"You must listen," it rasped.

Joao gulped, whirled back to the controls, unlocked them and sent the cab into a wild, spinning turn.

A high-pitched rattling buzz sounded behind him. The noise seemed to pick up every bone in his body and shake it. Something crawled on his neck. He slapped at it, felt it squash.

All Joao could think of was escape. He stared frantically out at the earth beneath, seeing a blotch of white in a savannah off to his right and, in the same instant, recognizing another airtruck banking beside him, the insignia of his own Irmandades band bright on its side.

The white blotch in the savannah was resolving itself into a cluster of tents with an IEO orange and green banner flying beside them.

Joao dove for the tents, praying the other airtruck would follow.

Something stung his cheek. They were in his hair—biting, stinging. He stabbed the braking rockets, aimed for open ground about fifty meters from the tents. Insects were all over the inside of the glass now, blocking his vision. Joao said a silent prayer, hauled back on the control arm, felt the cab mush out, touch ground, skidding and slewing

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across the savannah. He kicked the canopy release before the cab stopped, broke the seal on his safety harness and launched himself up and out to land sprawling in grass.

He rolled through the grass, feeling the insect bites like fire over every exposed part of his body. Hands grabbed him and he felt a jelly hood splash across his face to protect it. A voice he recognized as Thome of his own band said: "This way, Johnny! Run!" They ran.

He heard a spraygun fire: "Whooosh!"

And again.

And again.

Arms lifted him and he felt a leap.

They landed in a heap and a voice said: "Mother of God! Would you look at that!"

Joao clawed the jelly hood from his face, sat up to stare across the savannah. The grass seethed and boiled with insects around the uptilted cab and the airtruck that had landed beside it.

Joao looked around him, counted seven of his Irmaos with Thome, his chief sprayman, in command.

Beyond them clustered five other people, a red-haired woman slightly in front, half turned to look at the savannah and at him. He recognized the woman immediately: Dr. Rhin Kelly of the IEO. When they had met in the A' Chigua nightclub in Bahia, she had seemed exotic and desirable to Joao. Now, she wore a field uniform instead of gown and jewels, and her eyes held no invitation at all.

"I see a certain poetic justice in this . . . traitors," she said.

JOAO lifted himself to his feet, took a cloth proferred by one of his men, wiped off the last of the jelly. He felt hands brushing him, clearing dead insects off his coveralls. The pain of his skin was receding under the medicant jelly, and now he found himself dominated by puzzled questioning as he recognized the mood of the IEO personnel.

They were furious and it was directed at him . . . and at his fellow Irmandades.

Joao studied the woman, noting how her green eyes glared at him, the pink flush to her skin.

"Dr. Kelly?" Joao said.

"If it isn't Joao Martinho, jefe of the Irmandades," she said, "the traitor of the Piratininga."

"They are crazy, that is the only thing, I think," said Thome.

"Your pets turned on you, didn't they?" she demanded. "And wasn't that inevitable?"

"Would you be so kind as to explain," Joao said.

"I don't need to explain," she said. "Let your friends out there explain." She pointed toward the

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rim of jungle beyond the savannah.

Joao looked where she pointed, saw a line of men in bandeirante white standing untouched amidst the leaping, boiling insects in the jungle shadow. He took a pair of binoculars from around the neck of one of his men, focused on the figures. Knowing what to look for made the identification easy.

"Tommy," Joao said.

His chief sprayman, Thome, bent close, rubbing at an insect sting on his swarthy cheek.

In a low voice, Joao explained what the figures at the jungle edge were.

"Aieee," Thome said.

An Irnandade on Joao's left crossed himself.

"What was it we leaped across coming in here?" Joao asked.

"A ditch," Thome said. "It seems to be filled with couroq jelly . . . an insect barrier of some kind."

Joao nodded. He began to have unpleasant suspicions about their position here. He looked at Rhin Kelly. "Dr. Kelly, where are the rest of your people? Surely there are more than five in an IEO field crew."

Her lips compressed, but she remained silent.

"So?" Joao glanced around at the tents, seeing their weathered condition. "And where is your equipment, your trucks and lab huts and jitneys?"

"Funny thing you should ask," she said, but there was uncertainty atop the sneering quality of her voice. "About a kilometer into the trees over there . . ." She nodded to her left. ". . . is a wrecked jungle truck containing most of our . . . equipment, as you call it. The track spools of our truck were eaten away by acid."

"Acid?"

"It smelled like oxalic," said one of her companions, a blonde Nordic with a scar beneath his right eye.

"Start from the beginning," Joao said.

"We were cut off here almost six weeks ago," said the blond man. "Something got our radio, our truck—they looked like giant chiggers and they can shoot an acid spray about fifteen meters."

"There's a glass case containing three dead specimens in my lab tent," said Dr. Kelly.

Joao pursued his lips, thinking. "So?"

"I heard part of what you were telling your men there," she said. "Do you expect us to believe that?"

"It is of no importance to me what you believe," Joao said. "How did you get here?"

"We fought our way in here from the truck using *caramuru* cold-fire spray," said the blond man. "We dragged along what supplies we could, dug a trench

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around our perimeter, poured in the couroq powder, added the jell compound and topped it off with all our *copahu* oil . . . and here we sat."

"How many of you?" Joao asked.

"There were fourteen of us," said the man.

JOAO rubbed the back of his neck where the insect stings were again beginning to burn. He glanced around at his men, assessing their condition and equipment, counted four spray rifles, saw the men carried spare charge cylinders on slings around their necks.

"The airtruck will take us," he said. "We had better get out of here."

Dr. Kelly looked out to the savannah, said: "I think it has been too late for that since a few seconds after you landed, bandeirante. I think in a day or so there'll be a few less traitors around. You're caught in your own trap."

Joao whirled to stare at the airtruck, barked: "Tommy! Vince! Get . . ." He broke off as the airtruck sagged to its left.

"It's only fair to warn you," said Dr. Kelly, "to stay away from the edge of the ditch unless you first spray the opposite side. They can shoot a stream of acid at least fifteen meters . . . and as you can see . . ." She nodded toward the airtruck. ". . . the acid eats metal."

"You're insane," Joao said. "Why didn't you warn us immediately?"

"Warn you?"

Her blonde companion said: "Rhin, perhaps we . . ."

"Be quiet, Hogar," she said, and turned back to Joao. "We lost nine men to your playmates." She looked at the small band of Irmandades. "Our lives are little enough to pay now for the extinction of eight of you . . . traitors."

"You *are* insane," Joao said.

"Stop playing innocent, bandeirante," she said. "We have seen your companions out there. We have seen the new playmates you bred . . . and we understand that you were too greedy; now your game has gotten out of hand."

"You've not seen my Irmaos doing these things," Joao said. He looked at Thome. "Tommy, keep an eye on these insane ones." He lifted the spray rifle from one of his men, took the man's spare charges, indicated the other three armed men. "You —come with me."

"Johnny, what do you do?" Thome asked.

"Salvage the supplies from the truck," Joao said. He walked toward the ditch nearest the airtruck, laid down a hard mist of foamal beyond the ditch, beck-

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oned the others to follow and leaped the ditch.

LITTLE more than an hour later, with all of them acid burned—two seriously—the Irmandades retreated back across the ditch. They had salvaged less than a fourth of the equipment in the truck, and this did not include a transmitter.

"It is evident the little devils went first for the communications equipment," Thome said. "How could they tell?"

Joao said: "I do not want to guess." He broke open a first aid box, began treating his men. One had a cheek and shoulder badly splashed with acid. Another was losing flesh off his back.

Dr. Kelly came up, helped him treat the men, but refused to speak, even to answering the simplest question.

Finally, Joao touched up a spot on his own arm, neutralizing the acid and covering the burn with fleshtape. He gritted his teeth against the pain, stared at Rhin Kelly. "Where are these chigua you found?"

"Go find them yourself!" she snapped.

"You are a blind, unprincipled megalomaniac," Joao said, speaking in an even voice. "Do not push me too far."

Her face went pale and the green eyes blazed.

Joao grabbed her arm, hauled her roughly toward the tents. "Show me these chigua!"

She jerked free of him, threw back her red hair, stared at him defiantly. Joao faced her, looked her up and down with a calculating slowness.

"Go ahead, do violence to me," she said. "I'm sure I couldn't stop you."

"You act like a woman who wants . . . needs violence," Joao said. "Would you like me to turn you over to my men? They're a little tired of your raving."

Her face flamed. "You would not dare!"

"Don't be so melodramatic," he said. "I wouldn't give you the pleasure."

"You insolent . . . you . . ."

Joao showed her a wolfish grin, said: "Nothing you say will make me turn you over to my men!"

"Johnny."

It was Thome calling.

Joao turned, saw Thome talking to the nordic IEO man who had volunteered information. What had she called him? Hogar.

Thome beckoned.

Joao crossed to the pair, bent close as Thome signaled secrecy.

"The gentleman here says the female doctor was bitten by an insect that got past their barrier's fumes."

"Two weeks ago," Hogar whispered.

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"She has not been the same since," Thome said. "We humor her, jefe, no?"

Joao wet his lips with his tongue. He felt suddenly dizzy and too warm.

"The insect that bit her was similar to the ones that were on you," Hogar said, and his voice sounded apologetic.

They are making fun of me! Joao thought.

"I give the orders here!" he snapped.

"Y. ., jefe," Thome said. "But you . . ."

"What difference does it make who gives the orders?"

It was Dr. Kelly close behind him.

Joao turned, glared at her. How hateful she looked . . . in spite of her beauty.

"What's the difference?" she demanded. "We'll all be dead in a few days anyway." She stared out across the savannah. "More of your friends have arrived."

JOAO looked to the forest shadow, saw more human-like figures arriving. They appeared familiar and he wondered what it was—something at the edge of his mind, but his head hurt. Then he realized they looked like sertao Indians, like the pair who had lured him here. There were at least a hundred of them, apparently identical in every visible respect.

More were arriving by the second.

Each of them carried a qena flute.

There was something about the flutes that Joao felt he should remember.

Another figure came advancing through the *Indians*, a thin man in a black suit, his hair shiny silver in the sunlight.

"Father!" Joao gasped.

I'm sick, he thought. *I must be delerious.*

"That looks like the Prefect," Thome said. "Is it not so, Ramon?"

The Irmandade he addressed said: "If it is not the Prefect, it is his twin. Here, Johnny. Look with the glasses."

Joao took the glasses, focused on the figure advancing toward them through the grass. The glasses felt so heavy. They trembled in his hands and the figure coming toward them was blurred.

"I cannot see!" Joao muttered and he almost dropped the glasses.

A hand steadied him, and he realized he was reeling.

In an instant of clarity, he saw that the line of Indians had raised their flutes, pointing the IEO camp. That buzzing-rasping that had shaken his bones in the airtruck cab filled the universe around him. He saw his companions begin to fall.

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In the instant before his world went blank, Joao heard his father's voice calling strongly: "Joao! Do not resist! Put down your weapons!"

The trampled grassy earth of the campsite, Joao saw, was coming up to meet his face.

It cannot be my father, Joao thought. *My father is dead and they've copied him . . . mimicry, nothing more.*

Darkness.

There was a dream of being carried, a dream of tears and shouting, a dream of violent protests and defiance and rejection.

He awoke to yellow-orange light and the figure who could not be his father bending over him, thrusting a hand out, saying: "Then examine my hand if you don't believe!"

But Joao's attention was on a face behind his father. It was a giant face, baleful in the strange light, its eyes brilliant and glaring with pupils within pupils. The face turned, and Joao saw it was no more than two centimeters thick. Again, it turned, and the eyes focused on Joao's feet.

Joao forced himself to look down, began trembling violently as he saw he was half enveloped in a foaming green cocoon, that his skin shared some of the same tone.

"Examine my hand!" ordered the old-man figure beside him.

"He has been dreaming." It was a resonant voice that boomed all around him, seemingly coming from beneath the giant face. "He has been dreaming," the voice repeated. "He is not quite awake."

With an abrupt, violent motion, Joao reached out, clutched the proferred hand.

It felt warm . . . human.

For no reason he could explain, tears came to Joao's eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" he whispered. He shook his head to clear away the tears.

"Joao, my son," said his father's voice.

Joao looked up at the familiar face. It *was* his father and no mistake. "But . . . your heart," Joao said.

"My pump," the old man said. "Look." And he pulled his hand away, turned to display where the back of his black suit had been cut away, its edges held by some gummy substance, and a pulsing surface of oily yellow between those cut edges.

Joao saw the hair-fine scale lines, the multiple shapes, and he recoiled.

So it was a copy, another of their tricks.

THE old man turned back to face him. "The old pump failed and they gave me a new one," he said. "It shares my blood and lives off me and it'll give me a few more years. What

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do you think our bright IEO specialists will say about the *usefulness* of that?"

"Is it really you?" Joao debanded.

"All except the pump," said the old man. "They had to give you and some of the others a whole new blood system because of all the corrosive poison that got into you."

Joao lifted his hands, stared at them.

"They know medical tricks we haven't even dreamed about," the old man said. "I haven't been this excited since I was a boy. I can hardly wait to get back and . . . Joao! What is it?"

Joao was thrusting himself up, glaring at the old man. "We're not human any more if . . . We're not human!"

"Be still, son!" the old man ordered.

"If this is true," Joao protested, "they're in control." He nodded toward the giant face behind his father. "They'll *rule* us!"

He sank back, gasping. "We'll be their slaves."

"Foolishness," rumbled the drum voice.

Joao looked at the giant face, growing aware of the fluorescent insects above it, seeing that the insects clung to the ceiling of a cave, noting finally a patch of night sky and stars where the fluorescent insects ended.

"What is a slave?" rumbled the voice.

Joao looked beneath the face where the voice originated, saw a white mass about four meters across, a pulsing yellow sac protruding from it, insects crawling over it, into fissures along its surface, back to the ground beneath. The face appeared to be held up from that white mass by dozens of round stalks, their scaled surfaces betraying their nature.

"Your attention is drawn to our way of answering your threat to us," rumbled the voice, and Joao saw that the sound issued from the pulsing yellow sac. "This is our brain. It is vulnerable, very vulnerable, weak, yet strong . . . just as your brain. Now, tell me what is a slave?"

Joao fought down a shiver of revulsion, said: "I'm a slave now; I'm in bondage to you."

"Not true," rumbled the voice. "A slave is one who must produce wealth for another, and there is only one true wealth in all the universe—living time. Are we slaves because we have given your father more time to live?"

JOAO looked up to the giant, glittering eyes, thought he detected amusement there.

"The lives of all those with you have been spared or extended as well," drummed the voice.

(*Continued on third cover*)

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I smelled the trouble the moment I stepped on the lift and took the long ride up the side of the Lachesis. There was something wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it but

five years in the Navy gives a man a feeling for these things. From the outside the ship was beautiful, a gleaming shaft of duralloy, polished until she shone. Her paint and brightwork glistened. The antiradiation shields on the gun turrets and launchers were folded back exactly according to regulations. The shore uniform of the liftman was spotless and he stood at his station precisely as he should. As the lift moved slowly up past no-man's country to the life section, I noted a work party hanging precariously from a scaffolding smoothing out meteorite pits in the gleaming hull, while on the catwalk of the gantry standing beside the main cargo hatch a steady stream of supplies disappeared into the ship's belly.

I returned the crisp salutes of the white-gloved sideboys, saluted the colors, and shook hands with an immaculate ensign with an OD badge on his tunic.

"Glad to have you aboard, sir," the ensign said.

"I'm Marsden," I said. "Lieutenant Thomas Marsden. I have orders posting me to this ship as executive."

"Yes, sir. We have been expecting you. I'm Ensign Halloran."

"Glad to meet you, Halloran."

"Skipper's orders, sir. You are to report to him as soon as you come aboard."

Then I got it. Everything was SOP. The ship wasn't taut, she was tight! And she wasn't happy. There was none of the devil-maycare spirit that marks crews

A Question Of Courage

By J. F. BONE

Illustrated by FINLAY

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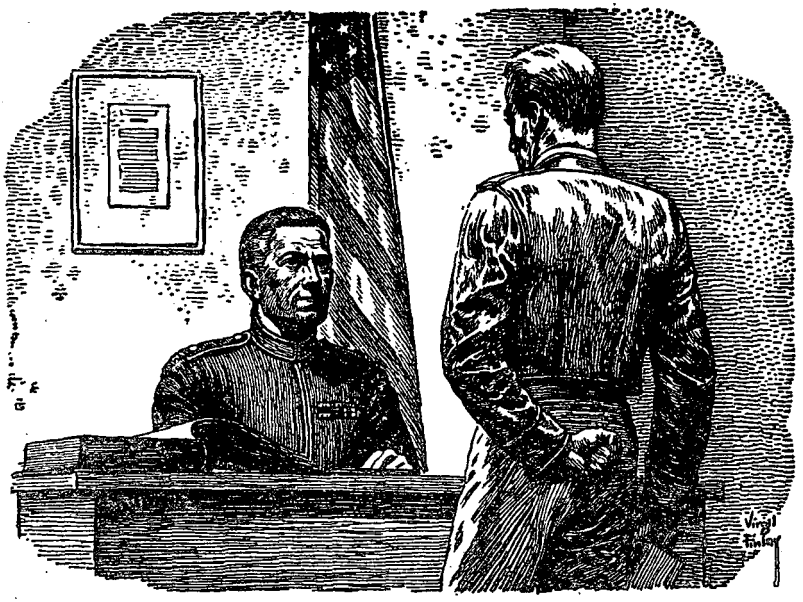

in the Scouting Force and separates them from the stodgy mass of the Line. Every face I saw on my trip to the skipper's cabin was blank, hard-eyed, and unsmiling. There was none of the human noise that normally echoes through a ship, no laughter, no clatter of equipment, no deviations from the order and precision so dear to admirals' hearts. This crew was G.I. right down to the last seam tab on their uniforms. Whoever the skipper was, he was either bucking for another cluster or a cold-feeling automaton to whom the Navy Code was father, mother, and Bible.

The O.D. stopped before the closed door, executed a mechanical right face, knocked the prescribed three times and opened the door smartly on the heels of the word "Come" that erupted from the inside. I stepped in followed by the O.D.

"Commander Chase," the O.D. said. "Lieutenant Marsden."

Chase! Not Cautious Charley Chase! I could hardly look at the man behind the command desk. But look I did—and my heart did a ninety degree dive straight to the thick soles of my space boots. No wonder this ship was sour. What else could happen with Lieutenant Commander Charles Augustus Chase in command! He was three classes up on me, but even though he was a First Classman at the time I

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crawled out of Beast Barracks, I knew him well. Every Midshipman in the Academy knew him—Rule-Book Charley — By-The-Numbers Chase—his nicknames were legion and not one of them was friendly. "Lieutenant Thomas Marsden reporting for duty," I said.

He looked at the O.D. "That'll be all, Mr. Halloran," he said.

"Aye, sir," Halloran said woodenly. He stepped backward, saluted, executed a precise about face and closed the hatch softly behind him.

"Sit down, Marsden," Chase said. "Have a cigarette."

He didn't say, "Glad to have you aboard." But other than that he was Navy right down to the last parenthesis. His voice was the same dry schoolmaster's voice I remembered from the Academy. And his face was the same dry gray with the same fishy blue eyes and rat trap jaw. His hair was thinner, but other than that he hadn't changed. Neither the war nor the responsibilities of command appeared to have left their mark upon him. He was still the same lean, undersized square-shouldered blob of nastiness.

I took the cigarette, sat down, puffed it into a glow, and looked around the drab 6 x 8 foot cubicle called the Captain's cabin by ship designers who must have laughed as they laid out the plans. It had about the room of a good-sized coffin. A copy of he Navy Code was lying on the desk. Chase had obviously been reading his bible.

"You are three minutes late, Marsden," Chase said. "Your orders direct you to report at 0900. Do you have any explanation?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Don't let it happen again. On this ship we are prompt."

"Aye, sir," I muttered.

He smiled, a thin quirk of thin lips. "Now let me outline your duties, Marsden. You are posted to my ship as Executive Officer. An Executive Officer is the Captain's right hand."

"So I have heard," I said drily.

"Belay that, Mr. Marsden. I do not appreciate humor during duty hours."

You wouldn't, I thought.

"As I was saying, Marsden, Executive Officer, you will be responsible for—" He went on and on, covering the Code-chapter, book and verse on the duties of an Executive Officer. It made no difference that I had been Exec under Andy Royce, the skipper of the "Clotho", the ship with the biggest confirmed kill in the entire Fleet Scouting Force. I was still a new Exec, and the book said I must be briefed on my duties. So "briefed" I was—for a solid hour.

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Feeling angry and tired, I finally managed to get away from Rule Book Charley and find my quarters which I shared with the Engineer. I knew him casually, a glum reservist named Allyn. I had wondered why he always seemed to have a chip on his shoulder. Now I knew.

He was lying in his shock-couch as I came in. "Welcome, sucker," he greeted me. "Glad to have you aboard."

"The feeling's not mutual," I snapped.

"What's the matter? Has the Lieutenant Commander been rolling you out on the red carpet?"

"You could call it that," I said. "I've just been told the duties of an Exec. Funny—no?"

He shook his head. "Not funny. I feel for you. He told me how to be an engineer six months ago." Allyn's thin face looked glummer than usual.

"Did I ever tell you about our skip—captain?" Allyn went on. "Or do I have to tell you? I see you're wearing an Academy ring."

"You can't tell me much I haven't already heard," I said coldly. I don't like wardroom gossips as a matter of policy. A few disgruntled men on a ship can shoot morale to hell, and on a ship this size the exec is the morale officer. But I was torn between two desires. I wanted Allyn to go on, but I didn't want to hear what Allyn had to say. I was like the proverbial hungry mule standing halfway between two haystacks of equal size and attractiveness. And like the mule I would stand there turning my head one way and the other until I starved to death.

But Allyn solved my problem for me. "You haven't heard *this*," he said bitterly. "The whole crew applied for transfer when we came back to base after our last cruise. Of course, they didn't get it, but you get the idea. Us reservists and draftees get about the same consideration as the Admiral's dog—No! dammit!—Less than the dog. They wouldn't let a mangy cur ship out with Gutless Gus."

Gutless Gus! that was a new one. I wondered how Chase had managed to acquire that sobriquet.

"It was on our last patrol," Allyn went on, answering my question before I asked it. "We were out at maximum radius when the detectors showed a disturbance in normal space. Chase ordered us down from Cth for a quick look—and so help me, God, we broke out right in the middle of a Rebel supply convoy—big, fat, sitting ducks all around us. We got off about twenty Mark VII torpedoes before Chase passed the word to

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change over. We scooted back into Cth so fast we hardly knew we were gone. And then he raises hell with Detector section for not identifying every class of ship in that convoy!

"And when Bancroft, that's the exec whom you've relieved, asked for a quick check to confirm our kills, Chase sat on him like a ton of brick. 'I'm not interested in how many poor devils we blew apart back there,' our Captain says. 'Our mission is to scout, to obtain information about enemy movements and get that information back to Base. We cannot transmit information from a vaporized ship, and that convoy had a naval escort. Our mission cannot be jeopardized merely to satisfy morbid curiosity. Request denied. And, Mr. Bancroft, have Communications contact Fleet. This information should be in as soon as possible.' And then he turned away leaving Bancroft biting his fingernails. He wouldn't even push out a probe—scooted right back into the blue where we'd be safe!

"You know, we haven't had one confirmed kill posted on the list since we've been in space. It's getting so we don't want to come in any more. Like the time—the "Atropos" came in just after we touched down. She was battered—looked like she'd been through a meatgrinder, but she had ten confirmed and six probable, and four of them were escorts! Hell! Our boys couldn't hold their heads up. The "Lachesis" didn't have a mark on her and all we had was a few possible hits. You know how it goes—someone asks where you're from. You say the "Lachesis" and they say 'Oh, yes, the cruise ship.' And that's that. It's so true you don't even feel like resenting it."

I didn't like the bitter note in Allyn's voice. He was a reservist, which made it all the worse. Reservists have ten times the outside contacts we regulars do. In general when a regular and reservist tangle, the Academy men close ranks like musk-oxen and meet the challenge with an unbroken ring of horns. But somehow I didn't feel like ringing up.

I kept hoping there was another side to the story. I'd check around and find out as soon as I got settled. And if there was another side, I was going to take Allyn apart as a malicious trouble-maker. I felt sick to my stomach.

We spent the next three days taking on stores and munitions, and I was too busy supervising the stowage and checking manifests to bother about running down Allyn's story. I met the other officers—Lt. Pollard the gunnery officer, Ensign Esterhazy the astrogator, and Ensign

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Blakiston. Nice enough guys, but all wearing that cowed, frustrated look that seemed to be a "Lachesis" trademark. Chase, meanwhile, was up in Flag Officer's Country picking up the dope on our next mission. I hoped that Allyn was wrong but the evidence all seemed to be in his favor. Even more than the officers, the crew was a mess underneath their clean uniforms. From Communications Chief CPO Haskins to Spaceman Zelinski there was about as much spirit in them as you'd find in a punishment detail polishing brightwork in Base Headquarters. I'm a cheerful soul, and usually I find no trouble getting along with a new command, but this one was different. They were efficient enough, but one could see that their hearts weren't in their work. Most crews preparing to go out are nervous and high tempered. There was none of that here. The men went through the motions with a mechanical indifference that was frightening. I had the feeling that they didn't give a damn whether they went or not—or came back or not. The indifference was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Yet there was nothing you could put your hand on. You can't touch people who don't care.

Four hours after Chase came back, we lifted gravs from Earth. Chase was sitting in the control chair, and to give him credit, we lifted as smooth as a silk scarf slipping through the fingers of a pretty woman. We hypered at eight miles and swept up through the monochromes of Cth until we hit middle blue, when Chase slipped off the helmet, unfastened his webbing, and stood up.

"Take over, Mr. Marsden," he said. "Lay a course for Parth."

"Aye, sir," I replied, slipping into the chair and fastening the web. I slipped the helmet on my head and instantly I was a part of the ship. It's a strange feeling, this synthesis of man and metal that makes a fighting ship the metallic extension of the Commander's will. I was conscious of every man on duty. What they saw I saw, what they heard I heard, through the magic of modern electronics. The only thing missing was that I couldn't feel what they felt, which perhaps was a mercy considering the condition of the crew. Using the censor circuits in the command helmet, I let my perception roam through the ship, checking the engines, the gun crews, the navigation board, the galley—all the manifold stations of a fighting ship. Everything was secure, the ship was clean and trimmed, the generators were producing their megawatts of power without a hitch, and the converters were

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humming contentedly, keeping us in the blue as our speed built to fantastic levels.

I checked the course, noted it was true, set the controls on standby and relaxed, half dozing in the chair as Lume after Lume dropped astern with monotonous regularity.

An hour passed and Halloran came up to relieve me. With a sigh of relief I surrendered the chair and headset. The unconscious strain of being in rapport with ship and crew didn't hit me until I was out of the chair. But when it did, I felt like something was crushing me flat. Not that I didn't expect it, but the "Lachesis" was worse than the "Clotho" had ever been.

I had barely hit my couch when General Quarters sounded. I smothered a curse as I pounded up the companionway to my station at the bridge. Chase was there, stopwatch in hand, counting the seconds.

"Set!" Halloran barked.

"Fourteen seconds," Chase said. "Not bad. Tell the crew well done." He put the watch in his pocket and walked away.

I picked up the annunciator mike and pushed the button. "Skipper says well done," I said.

"He got ten seconds out of us once last trip," Halloran said. "And he's been trying to repeat that fluke ever since. Bet you a munit to an "F" ration that he'll be down with the section chief trying to shave off another second or two. Hey!—what's that—oh . . ." He looked at me. "Disturbance in Cth yellow, straight down—shall we go?"

"Stop ship," I ordered. "Sound general quarters." There was no deceleration. We merely swapped ends as the alarm sounded, applied full power and stopped. That was the advantage of Cth—no inertia. We backtracked for three seconds and held in middle blue.

"What's going on?" Chase demanded as he came up from below. His eyes raked the instruments. "Why are we stopped?"

"Disturbance in Cth yellow, sir," I said. "We're positioned above it."

"Very good, Mr. Marsden." He took the spare helmet from the Exec's chair, clapped it on, fiddled with the controls for a moment, nodded, and took the helmet off. "Secure and resume course," he said. "That's the 'Amphitrite'—fleet supply and maintenance. One of our people."

"You sure, sir?" I asked, and then looked at the smug grin on Halloran's face and wished I hadn't asked.

"Of course," Chase said. "She's a three converter job run-

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ning at full output. Since the Rebels have no three converter ships, she has to be one of ours. And since she's running at full output and only in Cth yellow, it means she's big, heavy, and awkward—which means a maintenance or an ammunition supply ship. There's an off phase beat in her number two converter that gives a twenty-cycle pulse to her pattern. And the only heavy ship in the fleet with this pattern is 'Amphitrite'. You see?"

I saw—with respect. "You know all the heavies like that, sir?" I asked.

"Not all of them—but I'd like to. It's as much a part of a scoutship commander's work to know our own ships as those of the enemy."

"Could that trace be a Rebel ruse?"

"Not likely—travelling in the yellow. A ship would be cold meat this far inside our perimeter. And besides, there's no Rebel alive who can tune a converter like a Navy mechanic."

"You sure?" I persisted.

"I'm sure. But take her down if you wish."

I did. And it was the "Amphitrite".

"I served on her for six months," Chase said drily as we went back through the components. I understood his certainty now. A man has a feeling for ships if he's a good officer. But it was a trait I'd never expected in Chase. I gave the orders and we resumed our band and speed. Chase looked at me.

"You acted correctly, Mr. Marsden," he said. "Something I would hardly expect, but something I was glad to see."

"I served under Andy Royce," I reminded him.

"I know," Chase replied. "That's why I'm surprised." He turned away before I could think of an answer that would combine insolence and respect for his rank. "Keep her on course, Mr. Halloran," he tossed over his shoulder as he went out.

We kept on course—high and hard despite a couple of disturbances that lumbered by underneath us. Once I made a motion to stop ship and check, but Halloran shook his head.

"Don't do it, sir," he warned.

"Why not?"

"You heard the Captain's orders. He's a heller for having them obeyed. Besides, they might be Rebs—and we might get hurt shooting at them. We'll just report their position and approximate course—and keep on travelling. Haskins is on the Dirac right now." Halloran's voice was sarcastic.

I didn't like the sound of it, and said so.

"Well, sir—we won't lose them entirely," Halloran said comfortingly. "Some cruiser will in-

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vestigate them. Chances are they're ours anyway—and if they aren't there's no sense in us risking our nice shiny skin stopping them—even though we could take them like Lundy took Koromaja. Since the book doesn't say we have to investigate, we won't." His voice was bitter again.

At 0840 hours on the fourth day out, my annunciator buzzed. "Sir," the talker's voice came over the intercom, "Lieutenants Marsden and Allyn are wanted in the Captain's quarters."

Chase was there—toying with the seals of a thin, brown envelope. "I have to open this in the presence of at least two officers, he said nodding at Allyn who came in behind me. "You two are senior on the ship and have the first right to know." He slid a finger through the flap.

"Effective 12, Eightmonth, GY2964," he read, "USN 'Lachesis' will proceed on offensive mission against enemy vessels as part of advance covering screen Fleet Four for major effort against enemy via sectors YD 274, YD 275, and YD 276. Entire scouting Force IV quadrant will be grouped as Fleet Four Screen Unit under command Rear Admiral SIMMS. Initial station 'Lachesis' coordinates X 06042 Y 1327 Betelgeuse-Rigel baseline. ETA Rendezvous point 0830 plus or minus 30, 13/8/64. A. Evars, Fleet Admiral USN Commanding"

There it was! I could see Allyn stiffen as a peculiar sick look crossed Chase's dry face. And suddenly I heard all the ugly little nicknames—Subspace Chase, Gutless Gus, Cautious Charley—and the dozen others. For Chase was afraid. It was so obvious that not even the gray mask of his face could cover it.

Yet his voice when he spoke was the same dry, pedantic voice of old. "You have the rendezvous point, Mr. Marsden. Have Mr. Esterhazy set the course and speed to arrive on time." He dismissed us with the traditional "That's all, gentlemen," and we went out separate ways. I didn't want to look at the triumphant smile on Allyn's face.

We hit rendezvous at 0850, picked up a message from the Admiral at 0853, and at 0855 were on our way. We were part of a broad hemispherical screen surrounding the Cruiser Force which englobed the Line and supply train—the heavies that are the backbone of any fleet. We were headed roughly in the direction of the Rebel's fourth sector, the one topheavy with metals industries. Our exact course was known only to the brass and the computers that planned our interlock. But where we were headed wasn't impor-

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tant. The "Lachesis" was finally going to war! I could feel the change in the crew, the nervousness, the anticipation, the adrenal responses of fear and excitement. After a year in the doldrums, Fleet was going to try to smash the Rebels again. We hadn't done so well last time, getting ambushed in the Fifty Suns group and damn near losing our shirts before we managed to get out. The Rebs weren't as good as we were, but they were trickier, and they could fight. After all, why shouldn't they be able to. They were human, just as we were, and any one of a dozen extinct intelligent races could testify to our fighting ability, as could others not-quite-extinct. Man ruled this section of the galaxy, and someday if he didn't kill himself off in the process he'd rule all of it. He wasn't the smartest race but he was the hungriest, the fiercest, the most adaptable, and the most unrelenting. Qualities which, by the way, were exactly the ones needed to conquer a hostile universe.

But mankind was slow to learn the greatest lesson, that they *had* to cooperate if they were to go further. We were already living on borrowed time. Before the War, ten of eleven exploration ships sent into the galactic center had disappeared without a trace. Somewhere, buried deep in the billions of stars that formed the galactic hub, was a race that was as tough and tricky as we were—maybe even tougher. This was common knowledge, for the eleventh ship had returned with the news of the aliens, a story of hairbreadth escape from destruction, and a pattern of their culture which was enough like ours to frighten any thinking man. The worlds near the center of humanity's sphere realized the situation at once and quickly traded their independence for a Federal Union to pool their strength against the threat that might come any day.

But as the Union Space Navy began to take shape on the dockyards of Earth and a hundred other worlds, the independent worlds of the periphery began to eye the Union with suspicion. They had never believed the exploration report and didn't want to unite with the worlds of the center. They thought that the Union was a trick to deprive them of their fiercely cherished independence, and when the Union sent embassies to invite them into the common effort, they rejected them. And when we suggested that in the interests of racial safety they abandon their haphazard colonization efforts that resulted in an uncontrolled series of jumps into the dark, punctuated by minor

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wars and clashes when colonists from separate origins landed, more or less simultaneously, on a promising planet, they were certain we were up to no good.

Although we explained and showed them copies of the exploration ship's report, they were not convinced. Demagogues among them screamed about manifest destiny, independence, interference in internal affairs, and a thousand other things that made the diplomatic climate between Center and Periphery unbearably hot. And their colonists kept moving outward.

Of course the Union was not about to cooperate in this potential race suicide. We simply couldn't allow them to give that other race knowledge of our whereabouts until we were ready for them. So we informed each of the outer worlds that we would consider any further efforts at colonizing an unfriendly act, and would take steps to discourage it.

That did it.

We halted a few colonizing ships and sent them home under guard. We uprooted a few advance groups and returned them to their homeworlds. We established a series of observation posts to check further expansion —and six months later we were at war.

The outer worlds formed what they called a defensive league and with characteristic human rationality promptly attacked us. Naturally, they didn't get far. We had a bigger and better fleet and we were organized while they were not. And so they were utterly defeated at the Battle of Ophiuchus.

It was then that we had two choices. We could either move in and take over their defenseless worlds, or we could let them rebuild and get strong, and with their strength acquire a knowledge of cooperation—and take the chance that they would ultimately beat us. Knowing this, we wisely chose the second course and set about teaching our fellow men a lesson that was now fifteen years along and not ended yet.

By applying pressure at the right places we turned their attention inward to us rather than to the outside, and by making carefully timed sorties here and there about the periphery we forced them through sheer military necessity to gradually tighten their loosely organized League into tightly centralized authority, with the power to demand and obtain—to meet our force with counterforce. By desperate measures and straining of all their youthful resources they managed to hold us off. And with every strain they were

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welded more tightly together. And slowly they were learning through war what we could not teach through peace.

Curiously enough, they wouldn't believe our aims even when captured crews told them. They thought it was some sort of tricky mental conditioning designed to frustrate their lie detectors. Even while they tightened their organization and built new fleets, they would not believe that we were forcing them into the paths they must travel to avoid future annihilation.

It was one of the ironies of this war that it was fought and would be fought with the best of intentions. For it was obvious now that we could never win—nor could they. The Rebels, as we called them, were every whit as strong as we, and while we enjoyed the advantages of superior position and technology they had the advantage of superior numbers. It was stalemate,—the longest, fiercest stalemate in man's bloody history. But it was stalemate with a purpose. It was a crazy war—a period of constant hostilities mingled with sporadic offensive actions like the one we were now engaged in—but to us, at least, it was war with a purpose—the best and noblest of human purposes—the preservation of the race.

The day was coming, not too many years away, when the first of the aliens would strike the Outer worlds. Then we would unite—on the League's terms if need be—to crush the invaders and establish mankind as the supreme race in the galaxy.

But this wasn't important right now. Right now I was the executive officer of a scout ship commanded by a man I didn't trust. He smelled too much like a stinking coward. I shook my head. Having Chase running the ship was like putting a moron in a jet car on one of the superhighways—and then sabotaging the automatics. Just one fearful mistake and a whole squadron could be loused up. But Chase was the commander—the ultimate authority on this ship. All I could do was pray that things were going to come out all right.

We moved out in the lower red. Battles weren't fought in Cth. There was no way to locate a unit at firing range in that monochromatic madness. Normal physical laws simply didn't apply. A ship had to come out into threespace to do any damage. All Cth was was a convenient road to the battlefront.

With one exception.

By hanging in the infra band, on the ragged edge of three space, a scout ship could remain concealed until a critical moment, breakout into threespace—discharge her weapons—and flick back into Cth before an

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enemy could get a fix on her. Scouts, with their high capacity converters, could perform this maneuver, but the ponderous battlewagons and cruisers with their tremendous weight of armor, screens, and munitions couldn't maneuver like this. They simply didn't have the agility. Yet only they had the ability to penetrate defensive screens and kill the Rebel heavies. So space battle was conducted on the classic pattern—the Lines slugging it out at medium range while the screen of scouts buzzed around and through the battle trying to add their weight of metal against some overstrained enemy and ensure his destruction. A major battle could go on for days—and it often did. In the Fifty Suns action the battle had lasted nearly two weeks subjective before we withdrew to lick our wounds.

For nearly a day we ran into nothing, and such are the distances that separate units of a fleet, we had the impression that we were alone. We moved quietly, detectors out, scanning the area for a light day around as we moved forward at less than one Lume through Cth. More would have been fatal for had we been forced to resort to a quick breakout to avoid enemy action, and if we were travelling above one Lume when we hit threespace, we'd simply disappear, leaving a small spatial vortex in our wake.

On the "morning" of the third day the ships at the apex of Quadrant One ran into a flight of Rebel scouts. There was a brief flurry of action, the Rebels were englobed, a couple of cruisers drove in, latched onto the helplessly straining Rebel scouts and ragged them into threespace. The Rebs kept broadcasting right up to the end—after which they surrendered before the cruisers could annihilate them. Smart boys.

But the Rebels were warned. We couldn't catch all their scouts and the disturbance our Line was making in Cth would register on any detector within twenty parsecs. So they would be waiting to meet us. But that was to be expected. There is no such thing as surprise in a major action.

We went on until we began to run into major opposition. Half a dozen scouts were caught in englobements at half a dozen different places along the periphery as they came in contact with the Rebels' covering forces. And that was that. The advance halted waiting for the Line to come up, and a host of small actions took place as the forward screening forces collided. Chase was in the control chair, hanging in the blackness of the in-

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fra band on the edge of normal space. But we weren't flicking in and out of three-space like some of the others. We had a probe out and the main buffeting was taken by the duralloy tube with its tiny converter at its bulbous tip. With consummate pilotage Chase was holding us in infra. It was a queasy sensation, hanging halfway between normalcy and chaos, and I had to admire his skill. The infra band was black as ink and hot as the hinges of hell—and since the edges of three space and Cth are not as knife sharp as they are further up in the Cth compoents, we bucked and shuddered on the border, but avoided the bone-crushing slams and gut wrenching twists that less skillful skippers were giving their ships as they flicked back and forth between threespace and Cth. Our scouting line must have been a peculiar sight to a threespace observer with the thousand or so scouts flickering in and out of sight across a huge hemisphere of space.

And then we saw them. Our probe picked up the flicker of enemy scouts.

"Action imminent," Chase said drily. "Stand by."

I clapped the other control helmet over my head and dropped into the exec's chair. A quick check showed the crew at their stations, the torpedo hatches clear, the antiradiation shields up and the ship in fighting trim. I stole a quick glance at Chase. Sweat stood out on his gray forehead. His lips were drawn back into a thin line, showing his teeth. His face was tense, but whether with fear or excitement I didn't know.

"Stand by," he said, and then we hit threespace, just as the enormous cone of the Rebel Line flicked into sight. The enemy line had taken the field, and under the comparatively slow speeds of threespace was rushing forward to meet our Line which had emerged a few minutes ago. Our launchers flamed as we sent a salvo of torpedoes whistling toward the Rebel fleet marking perhaps the opening shots of the main battle. We twisted back into Cth as one of the scanner men doubled over with agony, heaving his guts out into a disposal cone. I felt sorry for him. The tension, the racking agony of our motion, and the fact that he was probably in his first major battle had all combined to take him for the count. He grinned greenly at me and turned back to his dials and instruments. Good man!

"Target—range one eight zero four, Azimuth two four oh, elevation one oh seven," the range-finder reported. "Mass four." Mass four:— a cruiser.

"Stand by," Chase said. "All

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turrets prepare to fire." And he took us down. We slammed into threespace and our turrets flamed. To our left rear and above hung the mass of an enemy cruiser, her screens glowing on standby as she drove forward to her place in the line. We had caught her by surprise, a thousand to one shot, and our torpedoes were on their way before her detectors spotted us. We didn't stay to see what happened, but the probe showed an enormous fireball which blazed briefly in the blackness, shooting out globs of scintillating molten metal that cooled and disappeared as we watched.

"Scratch one cruiser," someone in fire control yelped.

The effect on morale was electric. In that instant all doubts of Chase's ability disappeared. All except mine. One lucky shot isn't a battle, and I guess Chase figured the same way because his hands were shaking as he jockeyed us along on the edge of Cth. He looked like he wanted to vomit.

"Take it easy, skipper," I said.

"Mind your own business, Marsden—and I'll mind mine," Chase snapped. "Stand by," he ordered, and we dove into threespace again—loosed another salvo at another Reb, and flicked out of sight. And that was the way it went for hour after hour until we pulled out, our last torpedo fired and the crew on the ragged edge of exhaustion. Somehow, by some miracle compounded of luck and good pilotage, we were unmarked. And Chase, despite his twitching face and shaking hands, was one hell of a combat skipper! I didn't wonder about him any more. He had the guts all right. But it was a different sort of courage from the icy contempt for danger that marked Andry Royce. Even so, I couldn't help thinking that I was glad to be riding with Chase. We drove to the rear, heading for the supply train, our ammunition expended, while behind us the battlewagons and cruisers were hammering each other to metal pulp.

In the quiet of the rear area it was hardly believable that a major battle was going on ahead of us. We raised the "Amphitrite," identified ourselves, and put in a request for supply.

"Lay aboard," Amphitrite signalled back. "How's the war going?"

"Don't know. We've been too busy," our signalman replied.

"I'll bet—you're 'Lachesis' aren't you?"

"Affirmative."

"How'd you lose your ammo? Jettison it?"

"Stow that, you unprintable obscenity," Haskins replied. "We're a fighting ship."

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Amphitrite chuckled nastily. "That I'll believe when I see it!"

"Communications," Chase snapped. "This isn't a social call. Get our heading and approach instructions." He sounded as schoolmasterish as ever, but there was a sickly smile on his face, and the gray-green look was gone.

"Morale seems a little better, doesn't it, Marsden?" he said to me as the "Amphitrite" flicked out into threespace and we followed.

I nodded. "Yes, sir," I agreed. "Quite a little."

Our cargo hatches snapped open and we cuddled up against "Amphitrite's" bulging belly while our crew and the supply echelon worked like demons to transfer ammunition. We had fifty torpedoes aboard when the IFF detecor shrilled alarm.

Three hundred feet above us the "Amphitrite's" main battery let loose a salvo at three Rebel scouts that had flickered into being less than fifty miles away. Their launchers flared with a glow that lighted the blackness of space.

"Stand by!" Chase yelled as he threw the convertor on.

"Hatches!" I scramed as we shimmered and vanished.

Somehow we got most of them closed, losing only the crew on number two port turret which was still buttoning up as we slipped over into the infra band. I ordered the turret sealed. Cth had already ruined the unshielded sighting mechanisms and I had already seen what happened to men caught in Cth unprotected. I had no desire to see it again—or let our crew see it if it could be avoided. A human body turned inside out isn't the most wholesome of sights.

"How did *they* get through?" Chase muttered as we put out our probe.

"I don't know—maybe someone wasn't looking."

"What's it like down there?" Chase asked. "See anything?"

"Amphitrite's" still there," I said.

"She's *what?*"

"Still there," I repeated. "And she's in trouble."

"She's big. She can take it—but—"

"Here, you look," I said, flipping the probe switch.

"My God!" Chase muttered—as he took one look at the supply ship lying dead in space, her protective batteries flaming. She had gotten one of the Rebel scouts but the other two had her bracketed and were pouring fire against her dim screens.

"She can't keep this up," I said. "She's been hulled—and it looks like her power's taken it."

"Action imminent," Chase ordered, and the rangefinder took up his chant.

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We came storming out of Cth right on top of one of the Rebel scouts. A violent shock raced through the ship, slamming me against my web. The rebound sent us a good two miles away before our starboard battery flamed. The enemy scout, disabled by the shock, stunned and unable to maneuver took the entire salvo amidships and disappeared in a puff of flame.

The second Rebel disappeared and we did too. She was back in Cth looking for a better chance at the "Amphitrite." The big ship was wallowing like a wounded whale, half of one section torn away, her armor dented, and her tubes firing erratically.

We took one long look and jumped back into Cth. But not before Haskins beamed a message to the supply ship. "Now you've seen it, you damned storekeeper," he gloated. "What do you think?" "Amphitrite" didn't answer.

"Probe out," Chase ordered, neglecting, I noticed, to comment on the signalman's act.

I pushed the proper buttons but nothing happened. I pushed again and then turned on the scanners. The one aft of the probe was half covered with a twisted mass of metal tubing that had once been our probe. We must have smashed it when we rammed. Quickly I shifted to the auxiliary probe, but the crumpled mass had jammed the hatch. It wouldn't open.

"No probes, sir," I announced.

"Damn," Chase said. "Well, we'll have to do without them. Hold tight, we're going down."

We flicked into threespace just in time to see a volcano of fire erupt from "Amphitrite's" side and the metallic flick of the Rebel scout slipping back into Cth.

"What's your situation, Amphitrite?" our signal asked.

"Not good," the faint answer came back. "They've got us in the power room and our accumulators aren't going to stand this load very long. That last salvo went through our screens, but our armor stopped it. But if the screens go down—"

Our batteries flared at the Rebel as he again came into sight. He didn't wait, but flicked right back into Cth without firing a shot. Pollard was on the ball.

"Brave lad, that Reb," Chase said. There was a sneer in his voice.

For the moment it was stalemate. The Reb wasn't going to come into close range with a warship of equal power to his own adding her metal to the "Amphitrite's," but he could play cat and mouse with us, drawing our fire until we had

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used up our torpedoes, and tnen come in to finish the supply ship. Or he could harass us with long range fire. Or he could go away.

It was certain he wouldn't do the last, and he'd be a fool if he did the second. "Amphitrite" could set up a mine screen that would take care of any long range stuff,—and we could dodge it. His probe was still working and he had undoubtedly seen ours crushed against our hull. If he hadn't he was blind—and that wasn't a Rebel characteristic. We could hyper, of course, but we were blind up there in Cth. His best was to keep needling us, and take the chance that we'd run out of torps.

"What's our munition?" Chase asked almost as an echo to my thought. I switched over to Pollard.

"Thirty mark sevens," Pollard said, "and a little small arms."

"One good salvo," Chase said, thoughtfully.

The Rebel flashed in and out again, and we let go a burst.

"Twenty, now," I said.

Chase didn't hear me. He was busy talking to Allyn on damage control. "You can't cut it, hey?—All right—disengage the converter on the auxiliary probe and break out that roll of duralloy cable in the stores—Pollard! don't fire over one torp at a time when that lad shows up. Load the other launchers with blanks. Make him think we're shooting. We have to keep him hopping. Now listen to me—Yes, Allyn, I mean you. Fasten that converter onto the cable and stand by. We're going to make a probe." Chase turned to me.

"You were exec with Royce," he said. "You should know how to fight a ship."

"What are you planning to do?" I asked.

"We can't hold that Rebel off. Maybe with ammunition we could, but there's less than a salvo aboard and he has the advantage of position. We can't be sure he won't try to take us in spite of 'Amphitrite's' support and if he does finish us, 'Amphitrite's' a dead duck." The "Lachesis" quivered as the port turrets belched flame. "That leaves nineteen torpedoes," he said. "In Cth we're safe enough but we're helpless without a probe. Yet we can only get into attack position from Cth. That leaves us only one thing to do—improvise a probe."

"And how do you do that?" I asked.

"Put a man out on a line—with the converter from the auxiliary. Give him a command helmet and have him talk the ship in."

"But that's suicide!"

"No, Marsden, not suicide—just something necessary. A

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necessary sacrifice, like this whole damned war! I don't believe in killing men. It makes me sick. But I kill if I have to, and sacrifice if I must." His face twisted and the gray green look came back. "There are over a thousand men on the 'Amphitrite,' and a vital cargo of munitions. One life, I think, is fair trade for a thousand, just as a few hundred thousand is fair trade for a race." The words were schoolmasterish and would have been dead wrong coming from anyone except Chase. But he gave them an air of reasonable inevitability. And for a moment I forgot that he was coldbloodedly planning someone's death. For a moment I felt the spirit of sacrifice that made heroes out of ordinary people.

"Look, skipper," I said. "How about letting me do it?" I could have kicked myself a moment later, but the words were out before I could stop them. He had me acting noble, and that trait isn't one of my strong suits.

He smiled. "You know, Marsden," he said, "I was expecting that." His voice was oddly soft. "Thanks." Then it became dry and impersonal. "Request denied," he said, "This is my party."

I shivered inside. While I'm no coward, I didn't relish the thought of slamming around at the end of a duralloy cable stretching into a nowhere where there was no inertia. A hair too heavy a hand on the throttle in Cth would crush the man on the end to a pulp. But he shouldn't go either. It was his responsibility to command the ship.

"Who else is qualified?" Chase said answering the look on my face. "I know more about maneuver than any man aboard, and I'll be controlling the ship until the last moment. Once I order the attack I'll cut free, and you can pick me up later."

"You won't have time," I protested.

"Just in case I don't make it," Chase continued, making the understatement of the war with a perfectly straight face, "Take care of the crew. They're a good bunch—just a bit too eager for the *real* Navy—but good. I've tried to make them into spacemen and they've resented me for it. I've tried to protect them and they've hated me—"

"They won't now—" I interrupted.

"I've tried to make them a unit." He went on as though I hadn't said a thing. "Maybe I've tried too hard, but I'm responsible for every life aboard this ship." He picked up his helmet. "Take command of the ship, Mr. Marsden," he said, and strode out of the room. The "Lachesis"

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shuddered to the recoil from the port turrets. Eighteen torpedoes left, I thought.

We lowered Chase a full hundred feet on the thin strand of duralloy. He dangled under the ship, using his converter to keep the line taut.

"You hear me, skipper?" I asked.

"Clearly—and you?"

"Four-four. Hang on now—we're going up." I eased the "Lachesis" into Cth and hung like glue to the border. "How's it going, skipper?"

"A bit rough but otherwise all right. Now steer right—easy now—aagh!"

"Skipper!"

"Okay, Marsden. You nearly pulled me in half—that's all. You did fine. We're in good position in relation to 'Amphitrite.' Now let's get our signals straight. Front is the way we're going now—base all my directions on that—got it?"

"Aye, sir."

"Good, Marsden, throttle back and hang on your converters."

I did as I was told.

"Ah—there she is—bear left a little. Hmm—she's looking for us—looks suspicious. Now she's turning toward 'Amphitrite.' Guess she figures we are gone. She's in position preparing to fire. *Now!* Drop out and fire—elevation zero, aximuth three sixty—*Move!*"

I moved. The "Lachesis" dropped like a stone. Chase was dead now. Nothing made of flesh could survive that punishment but we—we came out right on top of them, just like Chase had done to the other—except that we fired before we collided. And as with the other Rebel we gained complete surprise. Our eighteen torpedoes crashed home, her magazines exploded, and into that hell of molten and vaporized metal that had once been a Rebel scout we crashed a split second later. Two thousand miles per second relative is too fast for even an explosion to hurt much if there isn't any solid material in the way, and we passed through only the outer edges of the blast, but even so, the vaporized metal scoured our starboard plating down to the insulation. It was like a giant emery wheel had passed across our flank. The shock slammed us out of control and we went tumbling in crazy gyrations across space for several minutes before I could flip the "Lachesis" into Cth, check the speed and motion, and get back into threespace.

Chase was gone—and "Lachesis" was done. A week in drydock and she'd be as good as new, but she was no longer a fighting ship. She was a wreck. For us the battle was over—but

(Continued on page 67)

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THE SHEETED DEAD

By ROBERT ROHRER

Illustrated by FINLAY

A tale of horror . . . of an act of horror that could be avenged only by an act of greater horror . . . a story not for weaklings.

Man fought between the planets, and when his battles were done great clouds of radioactive dust blew through the galaxy. Badly scarred, Earth, the Mother Planet, could live on—if she could escape the dust.

So Man on Earth left the universe; he withdrew with a great flourish of electric arcs and fusing atoms. Man on Earth left his warriors to languish and die on Mars, on Jupiter, and in the thousands of space stations that

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dotted the void. Some of the Earthlings called Man on Earth a coward; others called him a genius. But in any case, Man left.

In the chaos of whirling electrons and atoms that was Earth-Man's Withdrawal, a tiny virus cell mutated from other virus cells that had been floating in the atmosphere of Earth. This cell was different from its forebears. For many years it was tossed about in the magnetic field above Earth. There the cell reproduced itself billions of times.

Finally a chance electromagnetic wave sloughed the great mass of virus cells from the roof of energy Man had thrown about his world. The cells were scattered from each other and began to drift down toward the gray, silent sphere below.

PHIPPS pushed the lid of his coffin open and swung his feet over one leaden side to the polished steel floor of the mausoleum. His dry, shrivelled eyes moved painfully about the hall of the vault. The roof of the hall was low, and tier upon tier of iron coffins lay on either side of Phipps's resting place. The blue glow of the dust that had risen from the bodies and seeped from the caskets suffused the entire mausoleum, and the coffins were like luminous hyphens from one end of the vault to the other.

These were the War Dead. Phipps was one of the War Dead. He could vaguely remember dying of radiation sickness years before. It had not been a pleasant death, so even his half-rotted mind retained the memory of it.

He could feel the glands of his body beginning to secrete the fluid they had been unable to produce for so long. He slipped down from the edge of the coffin. The dried skin of his legs and arms and chest cracked and squealed as he walked. He shambled down the rows of hyphens to the high, cadmium-coated door of the mausoleum.

The door had been forced, probably by scavengers. There had been scavengers before his death, because even then the people had been buried with their wallets in their coats and their jewelry on because of the radiation. And the scavengers had forced their ways into tombs and had plucked the bodies of the wealthy, and the scavengers had died of radiation sickness but they had died rich.

Phipps had been a soldier. He had not had to fight; the missiles had done the fighting for him, and most of the war had been carried on in space. But still, millions had died on Earth. Phipps had died watching the sun go down behind a half-destroyed skyscraper.

Suddenly Phipps realized that he had to see the sun again. He

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limped through the entrance of the vault and began to struggle up the tunnel that led to the surface. Fluid was once again oozing into his joints, and his knees moved more freely.

Perspiration was beginning to sting through the cracked pores of his forehead when he reached the cave entrance. With dull eagerness he walked into the open and raised his face to meet the light.

There was no light. The dull glow from a faraway city rippled over the terrain, but there was no light in the sky. No sun, no moon, no stars.

Phipps's mouth dropped open in anguished disbelief. There was only darkness above, a solid black arch that spread from horizon to horizon. For minutes Phipps stared at the abyss. Then he slowly clenched his hands and shook the fists before his face. He had heard the cowards' talk before his death, also, but he had never believed. . . .

He whirled around and limped furiously back into the cave. Little scales of dried skin flaked from his clenched hands as he walked. He knew what had to be done, now.

He re-entered the mausoleum and opened one of the coffins.

BRAKE of the Urban Guard took a last look at the sunless, starless sky and entered the small Harmonization Compartment of Captain Holloway's house. His surgically built-in Conditioner was enough to adjust his mind waves to the electromagnetic currents in the streets outside, but a house was a different matter; the walls of any enclosure deflected currents acoustically, building up a unique system of electrical vibrations more powerful than the vagrant streams in the open air. Unharmonized exposure to such vibrations caused a smashing of the order of a person's brain waves. The upshot was always mindless madness.

Brake braced himself for the ripple of nausea that usually passed through him during Harmonization; when the feeling had gone, he threw the necessary lever and walked into Holloway's front hall. The hall was doorless and airtight except for the two suction ducts in the ceiling. Holloway was a careful man.

Brake inserted his personal key into the phase transposer in the north wall, and

—he was standing in Holloway's conference room on the fourth floor of the building. He stiffened, saluted, and said "Sir?" to Holloway.

Holloway was sitting behind a broad, aluminum desk; his thick, greasy hair seemed blacker against the translucent memorandum screen that sprawled

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whitely behind him. He was tapping with his stubby fingers on the surface of the desk. It seemed that he should be clutching a cigar in one hand, but he was not.

"At ease, Lieutenant," said Holloway. "How many of your Ghouls are available?"

Brake calculated. "Seven," he said finally.

Holloway nodded and indicated a squat, gray box at one side of his desk. "Use my communicator to freeze them," he said. Brake complied. When he had finished talking to Waters at headquarters, he resumed his place before Holloway. He waited silently, with calm impatience, as Holloway tapped on the desktop introspectively. Finally the chief coordinator of City Defense looked up.

"Two peasants were found dead on the outskirts of Rural 6," he said. "Old man and his wife. They'd been torn apart."

Brake nodded. He wondered what a rural murder had to do with Urban Defense, but he did not say so.

"You're wondering what this has to do with Urban Defense," said Holloway. "Look at this."

HE threw a pair of dogtags strung on a chain to Brake. The tags were covered with mould; Holloway had wiped the face of one of them clean. The inscription read, "Ewin, Charles P./A365B47L/Spaceforce/P."

"It's a standard Armed Forces dogtag," said Brake.

"Yes, it is," said Holloway. "Another body was found near these peasants' farmhouse. It had those tags around its neck. The old man had broken a milk jar over its head, but that isn't what killed it." Holloway sniffed. "My medical men say it's been dead for twenty years. It was pretty badly decomposed when the Rural Guardsmen found it. They sent it to me. My guess is that it's one of the War Dead."

Brake looked dully at Holloway. "Do you mean that scavengers killed those peasants and left a body . . . ?"

"No," said Holloway. "The corpse had blood under its fingernails. Blood from the old man."

Brake knew that Holloway was pausing to let the implications sink in, but Brake couldn't make his mind comprehend what had just been said. He heard himself say mechanically, "Have the Geiger Screens been thrown up around the City?"

Holloway said, "Of course. And around Suburbia. No signals yet. I have my examiners turning that corpse inside out to see what activated it." He produced an apple from under his desk and began to munch. "Doc Phillips says this Ewin's reactivation could be an isolated

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phenomenon caused by the energy currents generated by the Withdrawal Complex in mid-City. He also says it could be a generalized phenomenon. He doesn't know. That's what you're to find out.

"The Tomb closest to those peasants' farmhouse is number 87. All soldiers, some interplanetary, some intraplanetary. Highly radioactive vault. Get your seven Ghouls out there and send them down for a look. When you've viewed the tapes, come back here and bring them with you. Maybe the Meds'll have a verdict by then."

"Yes, sir."

"Take some men with you, but for God's sake don't let this get out. We're having enough trouble with dementia already, without scaring more of it up. Dismissed."

Brake saluted smartly and walked to the phase transposer.

The metal Ghouls ground into the outer tunnel of Tomb 87. They were called Ghouls because they had been used during the War to transport people who had died of radiation sickness to the Tombs. Brake watched the machines wobble into the cave. He despised their spherical control units, their shovel-like hands. He felt repulsed whenever he touched them or had to go near them.

The War. He glanced nervously at his men, as though he were afraid they could read his thoughts. He thought often of the War, of the soldiers who had been left to die on the other planets and in the space battleships. He had been a small boy, then. He remembered his father's throwing the Telenews sheet to the floor and stalking from the dining room when the announcement came that Earth was to leave the galaxy without sending out rescue parties. Some scientists had said that the radioactive dust would sweep into Earth if the government waited another week. Others had said another month. Others had said another ten years.

THE last of the Ghouls rolled into the tunnel. All seven were equipped with television cameras and tape especially treated to withstand the ravages of the constant electromagnetic currents. They would tape what was inside and would return. The radioactivity was too dangerously high for a man to go inside, and, moreover, there was no way to harmonize with the tomb's currents.

Many people had died of radiation sickness on Earth. And then there had been plagues in disaster areas. All told, nine tenths of the population of the Western world had been destroyed. No word had come from Eurasia since the end of the War.

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What was left of technology in the West controlled the world. The West could have sent out rescue parties, but it chose to be sure that the world would not be inundated by the dust from space. Half of the survivors of the nuclear conflict had protested this decision violently; the outcome had been a civil war, which had culminated in the division of North America into city-governments controlled by a police force called the Guard. The Withdrawal Complex that sealed Earth from the universe with a shield of electromagnetism was located in Brake's City.

"More light," Brake barked to the men standing around a floodlight on a Hopper. The men stepped up the intensity of the lamp. Still the darkness seemed to crouch around Brake, too closely. He was always chilled by the black sky, even when he was in the brightly lit City. People were going mad because of that black sky, breaking down in the streets and killing themselves or others. The rate of deaths of this sort went up every year.

Brake shivered involuntarily. The ghostly outline of a Ghoul glimmered into view at the mouth of the tunnel.

"Tape viewers!" shouted Brake, to drive away the cold.

* * *

Phipps had been an infantry sergeant. His vocal cords had rotted to a whisper, but he still knew how to make men jump to obey his commands. After all the dead soldiers had filed out of the mausoleum and were standing shoulder to shoulder under the artificial night sky, Phipps had told them what must have happened, what they themselves already half-realized. He had felt the hate radiate from their cold bodies, the hate for all the fat, comfortable cowards who lolled in easy chairs while the bones of soldiers who could have been rescued rotted on the plains of Mars and disintegrated in the reaches of space.

And Phipps knew then, when he felt the hate, that he could lead these men. He did not know why he was able to walk and think when he should still be lying in iron silence on the smooth bottom of his casket; he did not care. He told his men what he wanted them to do, and they obeyed him.

First, because he remembered the Geiger Screens that had been used in the cities during the War, he had his men bathe in a lake that stood several hundred yards from the cavern.

Then he divided the dead men into groups of five, and deployed these groups across the countryside, and gave the order to march on the city whose light shimmered down on the empty tomb.

When his group came upon

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the man and his wife in the farmyard, Phipps gave the order to kill them. He watched while his men piled onto the couple, the fat old man and the fat old woman, and tore at the two until their screams were hollow things in the wind. He scowled as he looked at the makeshift house and the empty wastes around it. Man had retreated into his cities. He no longer dared to venture out into the darkness. He had betrayed the faith. It was time for a braver animal to seize the throne.

And so Phipps led the ranks of War Dead into Suburbia.

* * *

"Empty?" said Holloway.

"Yes, sir," said Brake. "The Ghouls couldn't find a single corpse."

Holloway nodded, as though he had known all along what the answer would be. "This is Doc Phillips," he said, motioning to a small, gray-mustached man who stood to Brake's left. "He's pretty sure he's found out what made that 20-year-old corpse tick."

Brake looked at Doc Phillips, who blinked. "It is some sort of virus," said Doc Phillips. "Our atomic microscopes hunted it out of a sample of the body fluid. The virus cells are dead now, at least the ones we found. My guess is that the milk killed them."

Brake said, "You mean the virus brought the man back to life?"

Doc Phillips shrugged. "I don't know whether you could call it life," he said. "The heart muscles are too decomposed to have functioned. No blood in the veins. But the thing did have automation—there was plenty of body fluid, and the muscles of the limbs had been restored somewhat. And evidently it was able to reason, in however limited a way. I'd say it was dead, but animate."

Holloway interposed from behind his aluminum desk, "Where did the virus come from?"

"Damned if I know," said Doc Phillips. "It could be a mutation caused by radiation, or something a soldier brought back from Jupiter—anything. But I've never seen anything like it before. Since the dead in our own graveyards haven't waked up so far, I'd guess that reanimation depends on the interaction of the virus and a high amount of radioactivity. That's *only* a guess, though."

"Do you think this—reanimation could be widespread?" asked Holloway.

"That's possible."

Holloway tilted his head sideways and looked down at the desktop. Brake knew the motion. His chest muscles tightened. He said, "Why did you ask that, sir?"

"The communications screen for City 34 went blank an hour

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ago," said Holloway. "We have not been able to renew contact."

The room was silent. Quiet city sounds murmured between the bars of an open window.

"I want you to take a Hopper to 34, Lieutenant Brake," Holloway continued. "No men, just you. I don't think men will do any good, now, but I want to know what's happened up there."

"Yes, sir," said Brake.

A distant scream drifted through the window.

"What . . . ," Brake began, but Holloway silenced him with a furious look.

Another scream followed the first one, and then another, until many screams jumbled through the window together, carried by the wind from some far place.

"What is that?" Brake said.

"It's Suburbia," said Holloway. His hand manipulated a control on the gray box, and he said into the face of the box, "Get me Suburban Guard Headquarters. . . . Brake, get to the Hopper. I'll manage the Urban area from here. Hello, have you got them yet? . . . Well, try again. . . ."

PHIPPS's mould-coated cerements trembled loosely against his body as he strangled the uniformed Suburban Guardsman. Finally blood welled up in the man's eyes, and Phipps felt the soldier's neck vertebrae crumple. He let the body fall heavily to the street.

All around him men and women ran or lay dying. Suburbia's uniform plastic dwellings were being systematically broken into and emptied and gutted by Phipps's men. Flames curled high against the black sky. *Soon there will be stars there,* thought Phipps. *Soon.* . . .

A Suburban Guardsman brought his rifle butt down on Phipps's shoulder from behind. Phipps turned and grasped the Guardsman's rifle around the trigger guard. The Guardsman's face was yellow and wet with fear. Phipps easily pulled the gun from the man's sweaty hands. Then he beat the soldier's brains out with two mighty blows.

The entire *coup* took less than fifteen minutes. As Phipps had expected, the Suburban Guard had been organized more for the shooting of stray animals who crept into the City for warmth than for the repulsing of an army. When it was all over, he assembled his men in the street and spoke to them in his hoarse voice.

"Somewhere on this continent," he said, "is a machine that has been used to blot our planet from the universe. This machine may be large, it may be small; it may be a huge computer, it may be a tiny tube; it may be hidden

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in a field, or in a tree, or under a lake, or in a man's brain. But we must find it. We must search this land until we have found the machine and reduced it to useless rubble, so that Earth may once again be warmed by the sun's light."

The dead men said nothing, but Phipps could feel their agreement. "We will search first," he whispered fiercely, "there!" And he pointed to the iron, cube-like buildings of the City.

The hundreds of death's-heads turned to the light that poured from the City. The purple-gray, antiseptically preserved bodies swayed toward the brilliance. Those men who still had lips drew them back over their gums, and those who did not clicked their teeth together in fury. The clicking rose in volume until it echoed from the houses of Suburbia and rose in a fountain of sound that arched through the air and splashed into the Urban streets.

"Forward!" rasped Phipps.

SILENCE. Brake looked down through the transparent belly of his hovering Hopper into the abyss of darkness that should have been flooded with the light of City 34. He slid the oblong port open and let the cool air blow up across his face. He leaned out through the port and turned an ear to the blackness. No sound.

He pulled himself back into the ship and closed the port. Perhaps he should drop a flare, but doing that would make no difference; he knew that all the people in City 34 were dead—even the ones who had done the killing.

Short tics convulsed the nerves at the base of his neck. His Conditioner was giving him twinges, as it often did when he was under strain. Dead—dead. He sucked in a breath and slapped the controls of the Hopper into position. The small craft began to sweep toward Brake's City along the electromagnetic currents that swirled through the atmosphere. With brilliant, scherzo-like jumps the Hopper skipped from wave to wave, sucking power into its engine here, filtering excess energy there.

Why were they doing this? Why, instead of rejoicing in their newly regained life, did they stalk into the cities and kill the survivors of the War? Could it be—could it be because of the Withdrawal? Were they after revenge for their deserted comrades?

Yes! Revenge! It was almost as though the dead men were stopping the Game and calling down the living for cheating; as though they were saying, "Ah-ah—back up. You had your chance to play things straight, and you blew it. You can't run away from what you've done, now."

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Brake clenched his teeth. Perhaps his City had been attacked by now. Perhaps the dead soldiers were marching into the cube-shaped buildings and smashing the floodlights and the neon lights and the electrical generators, forcing the City to open its mouth and swallow itself up in darkness.

Darkness. Brake looked away from the glowing controls of his Hopper and widened his eyes uselessly at the invisible ceiling of his ship. He shivered because of the great hollowness in his chest. Darkness.

Then the Hopper began to drop in a sickening arch, and Brake knew he was back over the City. He switched the steering controls to a special band sensitized to the shape of the Central Defense Building as it was outlined against the electromagnetic flow in the City.

He leaned over and looked down through the belly. There were lights below. *Thank you, God,* he thought.

The Hopper set down in front of Holloway's building. Brake pressed a button and the collapsible plastic hood of the small craft folded back. He looked up and let the light sweep down over his face and press against his eyes.

Then he looked down and saw the bodies. Some of the bodies were lying in the street, but most of them were crumpled at the bases of buildings, hunched into the angles between the sidewalks and the walls, their arms draped over their faces as though to hide the reflection of some awful knowledge.

FOR a moment, Brake stood in the cockpit of the Hopper and looked at the silent corpses. Then he snapped his eyes to the door of Holloway's building.

The door had been smashed in. Its massive iron body lay on the tiles of the Harmonization Compartment inside, across the splinters of the wooden inner door, which it had smashed in its fall. Brake jumped from the Hopper and ran headlong to the doorway; he pushed the fallen outer door over the tiles into the street; then he slid the two vinyl emergency panels into place and set the harmonization generators in motion.

Without bothering to cut the generators he slapped the inner panel open and ran to the phase transposer. The flat metal of the transposer was covered with long scratches. Brake inserted his key and

—he was standing in the chaos of Holloway's conference room on the fourth floor. The furniture of the room—the aluminum chairs, the small tables—had been twisted and broken and strewn over the floor.

Brake shouted, "Captain Hol-

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loway?" The yell *ping*ed hollowly from the walls. There was no answer. Brake jumped over heaped chairs and tables to Holloway's broad desk.

Holloway was lying behind the desk. Holloway's clothes had been ripped from his body, and so had his skin. His hair had been pulled out in hunks, and it lay scattered about him in great, bloody tufts. His eyes looked at Brake sadly.

Brake gripped the side of Holloway's desk and closed his eyes tightly. When he opened them again, they were looking at the window that had been smashed open on the other side of the room. Somehow the dead men had climbed up the wall outside.

He turned back to Holloway's desk. The control lever for Holloway's memorandum screen was coated with coagulating blood. Brake reached out and pushed the lever to "play".

Holloway's face sprang up on the screen that covered the wall behind the desk. It was Holloway's face as Brake now looked at it on the floor, slashed and bruised, except that on the screen it spoke to Brake.

"They have—the directions—for finding the—building of the Complex," said the face. "Guard—Complex. All costs don't let—them get—to it. Order. That is an order. Brake—or whoever sees thi—"

A hand reached onto the screen and jerked Holloway's face from the range of the camera. There was a short scream. Then another face appeared on the screen. It was a sagging, spongey face; its crown was bald, its eyes were feverish, and its teeth were bared in a terrible grin.

"Aahhhhhhgghahh," said the thing on the wall. A thread of saliva dropped from its lower lip, and its hand reached out, and the screen went blank.

So that was what they were after—the Complex. They must have tortured the information out of Holloway, or, more likely, found a City map somewhere in the building. They were going to destroy the Complex and thrust the world back into a contaminated universe. The last survivors of the War would be killed by fallout from space, if not by the dead soldiers.

Brake's face was a mask. He stumbled numbly to the phase transposer, turned the key, and —ran into the street to his Hopper. He leaned into the cockpit and snapped his Laser rifle from its holder. He had been ordered to protect the Complex, and he would.

HE began to walk away from Holloway's building. The dead men were probably regrouping somewhere, preparing for the final onslaught. God, that face on

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the screen! And Holloway—all that blood. His cold mind began to drift through a circle: Holloway, the blood, the face, Holloway, the blood, the face, Holloway, the. . . .

He tripped over a corpse and almost fell. He gasped, and a spasm went through his chest and legs as he stamped one foot wildly to the pavement to keep from falling. He straightened, threw his shoulders back, and marched down the street, looking from sidewalk to sidewalk, from window to window, for signs of his enemies.

He was halfway to the Complex when the lights began to go out. They had gotten to the electrical generators in the heart of the City. Brake began to walk more quickly. Behind him, the night closed in.

Only one of the floodlights over the doorway of the building that housed the Complex still burned. The door of the building had not been molested yet. Brake turned from the door and backed warily up the stairs to the road porch. The floodlight made a wide semicircle on the street immediately before the foot of the stairs. Brake could see his breath. Beyond the broken disc of light was total darkness. Most of the electrical generators must have been stopped.

Brake looked steadily at the white-flooded steps and pavement. He could feel the darkness behind him, above him, and before him; he was afraid to look a it. Afraid. Afraid.

Afraid? Of what? Of pain, of dead men who walked and killed? —no. He was afraid of the darkness. Afraid of the sunless atmosphere that brushed his cheeks and clung to his eyes. He was afraid of pain in the dark, and death in the dark, and dead men who walked and killed in the dark.

He tried to think of other things to smother his fear: a hot dinner, a good book, a girl's face; but these did not help him because he could picture them only under a dark sky, and his thoughts crashed into an old line from Shakespeare,

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun. . . .

He hadn't seen the sun since he was six years old. The sun, the sun, where was the sun? Gone behind a cloud? Yes, behind a cloud of fear and despair.

He wryed his face at the cliché. His tingling vitals mocked his mock disgust, and back his

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thoughts went to Holloway, the blood, the face, Holloway. . . .

No. No, this was not the way to wait. This was not the way to wait for them at all. He ought to check his gun (them, them, them) to be sure it would fire fire fire, to clean the dust from from from the precision mechanism, from the needle nose, from the barrel, from the sight, from the stock from the trigger from the

WHAT!

He stood and his heart was breaking from between his ribs with tremendous thuds that crashed in his ears. A sound? A foot scuffing on the street? He gripped the gun tightly, desperately, it was too small, it could not protect him, the cold night wind was blowing over it and so would they, they. . . .

No. They were not there, yet. Of course not. They were not there, just beyond the rim of the solitary floodlight, waiting for him to turn his back. Their eyes did not glitter in the light that glowed with less and less intensity from the pavement. No.

He took a deep breath. He lowered the gun. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette and a book of matches.

He had to turn around to shield the match from the breeze. He struck the match, and the sound of the sulphur tip raking the granulated matchbook was like the sound of a shoe scuffing.

AS he shook the flame out, there was a sound as of a match being struck behind him. And another. And another. And then there were a thousand matches being struck behind him, and he stood very still and did not look around, because he was afraid, afraid that he would be blinded by the light of all those matches that were moving up toward him across the street. He pushed the cigarette from his mouth and watched the glowing tip hurtle to the cement and saw small shreds of tobacco splatter out like satellites from a sun. And his chest was very cold, and his hands were numb against the barrel and the trigger guard of his rifle, and he turned around.

There. They were there. They were all of them the Face that had looked out at him from Holloway's memorandum screen, with the red eyes, the sunken gray skin, the obscene, shining pates, the knobby, stiff shoulders, the hollow chests, and the gangling legs.

They stood very still before him, like a field of stalagmites in a frigid cavern, and stared at him with their browless eyes. Brake looked from face to face. They hated him. They didn't even know him, and they hated him.

One of the men in the front rank stepped forward with the authority of a leader. He said, "Are you ready to die?" His

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voice was a piercing whisper.

Brake opened his mouth. Perhaps he could reason with the—thing. "What are you going to gain by this? By killing the last—survivors of—"

"You left some unfinished business on the outer planets," said the leader.

Unfinished business? What—oh. "But those—Don't move! I tell you I'll. . . ."

"You'll what?" The leader smiled. "You've already killed us, you know. And dead men never die." He started to move forward again.

Brake stepped back and stuttered, "But those men out there can't be saved now!"

"No," rasped the leader, "but they can be given a monument. We will kill all of you, and build in the sun. That will be their monument."

Brake fumbled desperately for words. "But you'll be exterminating the only remnants of humanity—the—all that's left of the race of—living mankind."

"Better a race of dead men than one of cowards."

Brake tried to say, *No, it's not true, we're* not *weak, we're* not *cowards;* but his tongue blocked his throat and he could not speak, and his heart was beating very rapidly, and he watched with palsied horror as the leader turned to the dead men and said, "Forward!"

THEY began to lumber toward him. He tried to raise the Laser rifle and fire, but suddenly it was very heavy, too heavy, too large for his hands to hold, and instead of coming up the gun slipped from his fingers and went down to the surface of the porch and hit with a *crack!* Two of the dead men grabbed him, and he began to shout and pull and lunge wildly.

"Nonononononono," he gibbered, clenching and unclenching his hands. He knew that he was about to die. He heard the men battering away at the door of the building. "Pleeese," he whined. "Pleeese, God, no. No."

His tongue was distended with fear. Dimly he cursed himself for his cowardice, and his face was flushed with shame as well as with exertion. But still the terror ate away at his strength, and he struggled with less and less effect. The dead men's hands were nylon bands around his wrists, and his body flopped pitifully on the cement as he jerked and strained. When were they going to do it? How?

Then he heard the door to the Complex go, with a great crash. The dead men surged forward, and he was dragged with them. He would be swept into the building without being able to harmonize with its concentrated currents. He struggled feebly. He tried to reach for the doorframe

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as he passed it, but his guards held his hands firmly to his sides.

They were inside. The nauseating pain ate into the back of his head as the electromagnetic undertow began to tear at the synapses of his brain and to grind his thoughts to powder.

Little by little his memory crumbled and his consciousness regressed under the pounding of the currents. His two captors released him, and he collapsed stupidly beside the door, holding his head and shuddering.

Through an idiot's eyes he saw the dead men rush into the vertical face of the Complex, saw them smash their bodies against it until it caved in, saw them tear at the wires inside until the field generators whined down from their superauditory pitch and the dazzling radiance of the sun broke over the windowsills and then sprayed against the aluminum walls in foaming waves of light.

And as the electromagnetic currents dissipated, Brake's Conditioner knocked the last supports from under his mind. He howled and rolled his eyes back into his head.

As he floundered and babbled on the floor, the Dead filed past him and through the doorway into the bright world outside.

THE END

(Continued from page 51)

somehow it didn't make me happy. The "Amphitrite" hung off our port bow, a tiny silver dot in the distance, and as I watched two more silver dots winked into being beside her. Haskins reported the I.F.F. readings.

"They're ours," he said. "A couple of cruisers."

"They should have been here ten minutes ago," I replied bitterly. I couldn't see very well. You can't when emotion clogs your tubes. Chase—coward?—not him. He was man clear through—a better one than I'd ever be even if I lived out my two hundred years. I wondered if the crew knew what sort of man their skipper was. I turned up the command helmet. "Men —" I began, but I didn't finish.

"We know," the blended thoughts and voices came back at me. Sure they knew! Chase had been on command circuit too. It was enough to make you cry—the mixture of pride, sadness and shame that rang through the helmet. It seemed to echo and reecho for a long time before I shut it off.

I sat there, thinking. I wasn't mad at the Rebels. I wasn't anything. All I could think was that we were paying a pretty grim price for survival. Those aliens had better show up pretty soon —and they'd better be as nasty as their reputation. There was a score—a big score—and I wanted to be there when it was added up and settled.

THE END

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in the shadow

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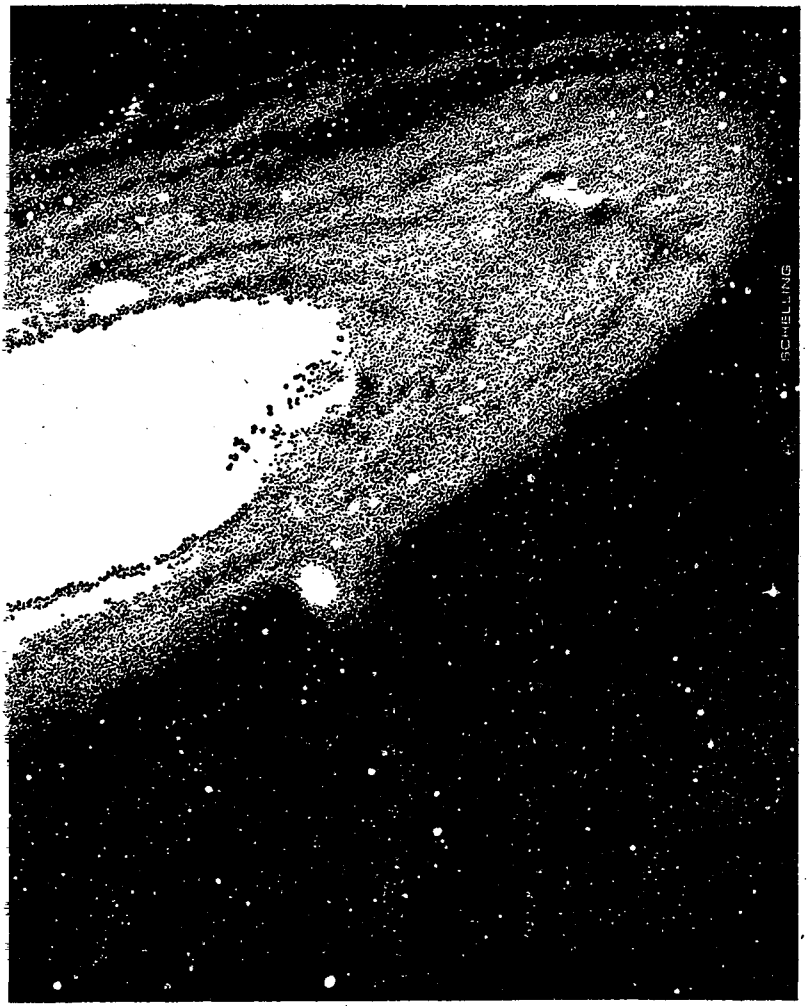

of the worm

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

Illustrated by SCHELLING

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The Beautiful Lady . . . the Android who does but may not love her . . . the Mad Villain . . . the Unutterable Menace . . . These are stock (almost laughing-stock) figures of science fiction. Now Neal Barrett (last in these pages with "To Plant A Seed") takes them and makes them vibrant with suspense, with poetry, with meaning. Follow, now, the Lady Larrehne and Steifen non-man as they grapple with ultimate good and evil.

A PIECE of space cracks high and sharp—ping-*ping!*—like glass blown to powder frost, and the ship blinks into cold brightness.

We are far from home—as far as far could be. The Great Lens is a blind-white eye, our ship a cobalt tear.

Emptiness. And a blue tear. But we are not alone. A fun-bubble drifts nearby—three dark Sheegai cease a fornication of great complexity, turn, and stare. I can sense their no-shapes, inside-out, like solid gloves, and imagine their great yellow eyes. . . .

Few are the ships they see out here, and surely none like ours—proud, sleek and graceful—a wolf that turned into a bird! Oh, fearsome and great she is! A league and a half of terror and love from silver beak to spiked bronze tail—a'shimmer with golden scales from steel-ruffle neck to dragon wings; and each bright horny shield as wide as fifty humans high.

It is a sight for even the Sheegai to record in gray-brittle memories. . . .

The ship is named *Gryphon*, and I stand alone in her cavernous skull, close my eyes and feel the great bird's surging power. My senses reach out, and I *know* her diamond-bright perfection, hear the clean, pure hum of submolecular song. All is well. There remains the one matter . . .

The ship is intelligent, certain-

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ly—in her own way. More so than I in many respects. I am not too good at simultaneous multiples, but *she* has noted a billion different things since emergence—*chatter! chatter! chatter!* She tells me the presence of the Sheegai bubble is reasonable, considering where we are—and I agree.

But while I am not a man, I have the near-duplicate aspects, and I wish to see such things for myself. Drifting to the starboard eye, I find the tiny dot against the black. I nod at it—as a real man might easily do—then turn, and quickly drop down the *Gryphon's* velvet throat . . .

I

LADY Larrehne waited in the maw of the great closed beak. She stood quite still; dark lashes curtained over violet eyes, golden legs straight, arms gently folded—a flower of cool evening, waiting for moonlight to bloom.

Standing there in velvet light—light that breathed as she breathed—her beauty seemed a fragile thing. But she was not fragile at all . . . The smooth angle of high cheeks swept down to lips of pliant warmth and fullness; but the fullness could fade to thin, taut determination in the flick of an eye.

Still, Larrehne of Mourlin was not perfect—perfection is fleeting. There were flaws in her character, face and figure, and the result was the unmatchable Larrehne: exquisite imperfection. No one who saw her remembered everything about her—and yet none forgot what they had seen . . .

Steifen the non-man was no exception—but non-men have a way of concealing those emotions they were never really meant to have. His eyes never wavered as he drifted from the throat of the *Gryphon* to stand before her. He merely lowered his head respectfully, and let the perfume of a thousand dreams wash over his senses.

"All is secure, Lady . . ."

Dark lashes rose slightly, still veiling violet eyes.

"Good, Steifen. I thank you." Then the lashes opened fully, and deep eyes warmed the non-man's chromium soul.

"It *is* there, isn't it?" she asked anxiously. "You've seen it?"

"No, Lady. I didn't look from Control. I came directly to you. But it is there."

She smiled, sighed gently. "Well, this is what we came for, old friend. I suppose there's no reason to put it off, is there?"

She stepped toward him, and the live Silkit robe gathered itself firmly about her.

Steifen did not move. She

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turned, let her eyes hold him a long moment, then stretched slim fingers to meet his own.

"Come. Please . . ." Her voice was a gentle whisper, warming him like summer twilight.

"Steifen, whatever is here, *you're* with me. I'm not afraid." Her fingers tightened over his. He met her eyes, and could do nothing but stand aside and let her walk beside him . . .

II

SIDE by side, they glided down the dark curve of the *Gryphon's* beak. The silver stream beneath them came alive to sniff the way; cresting in brightness ahead, dying in sparkle motes behind. Blue and white glowballs fluttered down to dart and skirr around their heads like restless halos.

The silver path hissed against ancient wood, faded, frothed to gray foam. Steifen's hand touched the hard, polished surface, felt the familiar, gem-studded pattern beneath his fingers.

He hesitated, glancing quickly at Larrehne. She was very still beside him, peering into darkness.

He paused a second more, then pressed fire-yellow and sea-green circles to life.

The great upper beak of the *Gryphon* moved, hummed back upon itself 300 silent feet above. Larrehne of Mourlin and Steifen non-man, mites in the domed tip of the giant's tongue, watched the planet's glare flood in upon them.

Larrehne gasped, wide, dark eyes bright in the green glow.

"I'm not sure—what I expected, but—it *is* very beautiful, is it not?"

Steifen shrugged. "From here, yes, Lady. This is a world that gains beauty as one retreats from it. I think it would be lovelier still from the other side of the Great Lens."

Larrehne's coral lips formed a wide O of mock astonishment.

"Why, Steifen!" She turned, touching his chin and bringing him around to face her.

"My, we're having a cynical turn, aren't we?" She laughed. Bright, silver bells. "This is a new facet of your personality, old friend—I find you ever full of surprises!"

Steifen permitted the thin ghost of a smile. "I was programmed full of surprises, Lady—your father didn't build a frog to converse with his swan."

Larrehne glanced up. Her head turned pertly, and she looked at him as if she were truly seeing him for the first time.

"Sometimes, Steifen," she said thoughtfully, a finger to her cheek, "I wonder if you haven't simply discarded your program in favor of one that suits you

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better. Honestly—the things you say!"

Steifen cleared his throat. "Of course, Lady, initial programming is only the first step toward creative fulfilment of a—"

Larrehne laughed, spreading her hands in surrender. "All right—I give up! When *you* start quoting non-man scripture . . . come on, I'm hungry, and I *don't* think I'll feel much like eating later." She nodded toward the swollen world above. "And I *would* like a glass of that Felizian rose and perhaps something from the sandwich tree—and do stop pouting—I *like* you the way you are!"

A QUICK selection, and luncheon sighed into place. Steifen dimmed the baleful light of the too-bright world, and glowballs clustered softly over the small round table.

Larrehne took quick, delicate bites, followed by sips of cloud-pink wine. Her face was bright with pleasure.

Steifen raised his own glass, holding it so the dim planet floated redly beneath the surface. "Truly," he said, "the wines of Feliz are unmatched, and I'm eternally grateful My Lady holds a sound block of shares in so worthy a world."

She laughed, but watched him with knowing eyes. "I did not meet Steifen non-man yesterday," she said casually, measuring the long stem of her glass, "nor the day before that. And when he speaks of wine, you can be sure he is *thinking* of something quite different. So. Steifen non-man, what are you thinking *about?*"

Steifen flinched. "My soul is open to your ever-watchful eye. What chance has a poor bundle of tubes and pipes against brains and beauty? I was not exactly thinking, Lady—it was more like idle speculation of the 'what if' variety. I was wondering what kind of a galaxy it would be if more worlds followed in the path of Feliz."

"I fear," she grinned, "it would be a rather blurry galaxy."

"No," said Steifen, "not *all* of them growing grapes—Heaven forbid. But it is *honest* work, isn't it? —And I was comparing that world's industry—with this one's." He pointed his glass at the pale circle of light above.

Larrehne looked down. "Oh . . . I see."

"A moment ago you accused me of taking a cynical turn, Lady," he said. "There, if you will, is truly a world for the cynic to contemplate, be he real or non-man. Ouriee, when it was not this, but a world of the Sheegai, and later, simply Outpost, when Man took it from them. And since—Carnis and Bouchier, and Abbattoir . ."

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Larrehne sighed. "So that's what's bothering you. . . . I certainly should have known. Steifen, Steifen—I *know*, and I like this dream of—of honest worlds. But," she peered at him closely, "I know *you*, too; and I know what is behind such thoughts. They have been there since we began this, and before."

She leaned across the table and covered his hand with hers.

"Steifen, your Lady is neither a butterfly wing or a flower petal. I *won't* shrivel and wilt from gazing on—that . ."

"No. No," he said firmly, "you will not, Lady. . . ."

III

LARREHNE stood. A quick wave of her hand, and the luncheon table sighed in upon itself, disappeared.

Steifen rose to stand silently beside her.

"I *know* what to expect," she said suddenly, sensing his mood, "I've seen the end of this. I can surely stand the beginning, Steifen."

There was a fine hint of firmness in her voice. Still the nonman did not move. Instead, he studied the tiny pulse in the pearl column of her neck. He knew. He had known for a long time that this moment would come; and when it did, that he would disobey her.

It was a peculiar feeling—and most unwelcome. Certain nodes sent uncomfortable shocks through his system.

A glowball drifted by her shoulder, warming white flesh. She smiled at him in the quick light, and at once he felt shame. He clenched his fists and stepped back from the railing—he could not stop her, but this time he could not cause her pain, either.

Then, the thought: To initiate an act that would bring her displeasure, wasn't that better than letting her bring displeasure on herself? The answer didn't click readily into place as it should have, and he knew what was wrong—he was wandering in the ever confusing corridors of realman philosophy. If *they* can't answer it, he asked himself wearily, what is such a thing doing in my head?

Larrehne of Mourlin was blessed with understanding. Moving quietly past him, she studied the gem patterns in dark wood. She moved as if simple curiosity instead of necessity brought her to pushbutton jobs that were his.

Her fingers drifted over softly burning jewels, settled, and pale blue opals winked and died. She looked up slowly, and at once her body trembled and stiffened against the rail . . .

Steifen followed her gaze as the dome flickered, blurred; and

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the planet rushed in until it covered all but a shard of space. He glanced away, quickly, at Larrehne, and swallowed hard. His fingers tightened around the rail.

His Lady felt pain. He knew it and could not act to stop it—not against her will. The muscles in her face contorted and her body trembled, but her eyes remained locked on the terrible, swollen globe that was hanging in black space . . .

Steifen found it hard to pull his own gaze away. The constant, rhythmic motion of the planet's surface had a hypnotic effect—and he knew the movement, there was no trick of a hazy atmosphere. Not this time. Whatever moved on *that* world was awesomely real . . .

First, pinpoint smudges of gray, evenly-spaced over the vast, swimming surface, each point ringed with a writhing, darker circle whose rim touched other rims circling other points—and swarming from those dark rims, the great wombs of the planet, the terrible blind herds stumbling toward death before birth could register on feeble brains. Then: *Snap! Jerk!* into the FTL auras gleaming a thousand miles above the surface.

It was over quickly, and he knew those near-mindless things never felt the wrench of gravitic death. Still, knowing and feeling are different—oh, so different! A non-man is acutely aware of this, and Steifen could not repress a shudder, or shut out the vision of things muscle-blue, fat-yellow and hideless speeding through frozen space. . . .

Blink! Blink! Blink!
One per second through the aura,
. . Out the big dark hole—
Moo-moo, Baa-baa, piggie lad;
Where did you leave your soul?

Larrehne gave a little cry that twisted Steifen's heart. He stabbed out savagely and hurled the bright image into comforting distance. The galaxy's slaughterhouse rolled back through space until it was only a gray-pink puffball spiked with delicate filaments of white.

Steifen felt her touch, a small hand pressing gratefully against his own—and at the same time the breath of her thoughts brushed him like the cold whisper of winter . . .

"Oh, Steifen, Steifen, maybe I am that butterfly wing—but don't let me be crushed just yet—not yet, Steifen! . . ."

IV

THE Balimann was tall, spare, hard-rubber muscled. His long face was fine-chiseled, high-

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polished, bleached and tanned until his color seemed to reach out and glow a good inch above the skin.

He threw back his iron-gray mane when he laughed, and his spike beard cut notches in the air. He shook his head and wiped his eyes with a ruffled sleeve.

Larrehne watched him curiously. The Balimann warded her off with a palm raised in peace. But it *is* marvelous, you know! Garahnell will be simply furious!"

Larrehne shook her head firmly. "Now you are putting words in my mouth, and I meant no discourtesy to Garahnell. I have business with him—as I have with you. I chose to stay on Balimann's Moon because I will *not* set my ship down on Slaughterhouse. Never. When we have finished here, Garahnell can come and join us, and—that amuses you, Balimann?"

His grin had widened as she spoke. Now he shrugged easily. "Oh, I wasn't laughing at *you*, Lady. Of course you couldn't know, but—Garahnell, come *here*? Never in a million years!"

"And why not?" she asked tightly.

Balimann looked at her steadily, then lowered his eyes with a slight bow. "That is for Garahnell to tell you, Lady—if he so wishes."

It was Larrehne's turn to shrug. "As you say, of course. It is certainly none of my business."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out quite that way. I—" Suddenly his hand jerked to his head as if he had remembered something important.

"Ah, Lady, I am *much* too isolated here! Forgive me. I have committed the worst sin of all—tempting a woman with a secret then announcing that I cannot tell it to her! Hah! Balimann the Bumkin!"

Larrehne laughed. "You are forgiven, Balimann. And, it *was not* a woman's prying, really. I merely thought that you and Lord Garahnell, under the circumstances . . ."

Balimann nodded. "*That* I can answer, Lady. Garahnell and I *are* rather dependent upon each other for whatever companionship we require; and fortunately, both our requirements are small—what I mean to say is that we value each other's absence so highly that a strong bond exists between us." Balimann smiled. "So Lord Garahnell keeps to his pesthole—and I to mine."

Larrehne glanced about the room. "My, it seems a warm and friendly pesthole to me, Balimann."

"Because, for some happy reason, Lady, you have chosen to bring a bright candle into this dark place . ."

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Larrehne read the question on his lips. She ignored it, stood, and walked to the high port that looked from The Balimann's study onto the great night. Steifen stood in the shadows there, and she followed his gaze upward where the *Gryphon* hung like a brass and silver moon. She smiled at the non-man, and Steifen understood. She turned and faced Balimann.

"I'm sure you must already know why I have come here."

The dark head lifted slowly, then bowed solemnly. "I feared it was not the charm of Balimann himself that brought you to the ice-thin edge of the galaxy." He sighed. "I'm afraid I am still The Balimann, then—keeper of Andromeda's ugly child. You come, Lady, to see The Worm. This I know . . ."

Larrehne laughed. "I would never say this Wormkeeper lacks charm—but I fear life on this lonely moon has turned him into a very bad poet."

Balimann grinned and refilled her glass with dark wine. "Perhaps," he said slyly, "but I am also the *best* poet on Balimann's Moon—am I not?" He spread his hands in bewilderment. "I ask you, Lady—what other weapon have I—but the evasion of poetry? I cling like a flea to the rim of the Big Wheel—but I am still a *man!* I will spout poems until I am blue in the face if I believe there is a small chance of changing your mind. How, I ask you, can I hope to win the fair Larrehne after I have shown her the Great Horror, the Eater of Worlds, the—"

"Oh, stop it!" Larrehne laughed. "I've heard all the scary stories in my cradle, Balimann. Now I am a woman, and I wish to see this—World Eater for myself."

Balimann was silent a long moment. He stood, finally, his hands braced on the table between them. His eyes were dark and somber now, burning like black suns into her own.

"Then I have done what I can to dissuade you?" he said. Larrehne was shocked by the change in his voice. She stared up at him, saying nothing.

"Yes," he said finally, "I see that I have. Then of course you shall see the thing, Lady. I cannot deny you."

He stood, extending his arm. "Now, Lady, it is late, and I suggest you rest from your journey. We're somewhat isolated here, but I think you'll find most of the comforts. And tomorrow," he added grimly, "I believe you will most assuredly need your strength."

Larrehne did not rise. She watched him curiously. *"I'm* not tired, Balimann, really. Is there some reason, some preparations you must make—"

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Balimann sighed. "You want to know why I still evade, yes?" He shook his head, and Larrehne decided the wine had begun to show in the man's eyes, in the way the muscles moved at the corners of his mouth.

"No reason, Lady," he went on. "—at least, not for you. This is something I do for myself. Call it the small eccentricity of a host who is a stranger to his role. I cannot deny you—I said that—but one thing . ." He held up a finger. "When you leave, I would like to hear that you've enjoyed a restful night on Balimann's Moon." He spread his hands, smiling wearily. "And how could this be—if I let you see the Nightmare of Nightmares your very first night. . . . ?"

V

LARREHNE rose refreshed. Not even the memory of Slaughterhouse, or the gloomy promises of her host, disturbed her sleep. She found her Selfband and spent a peaceful hour before Steifen came to bathe and dress her for the day.

"You slept well, Lady?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, Steifen. And you?"

"Very comfortably, Lady."

It was always the same ritual, though the words varied slightly from day to day. They both knew Steifen had not slept since the day of his creation; but it was an enjoyable way to begin the day.

It was, Steifen admitted, a beautiful day. Give The Balimann credit for that. Artificial, yes—but the 'sun' had risen with a dazzling display through the rose quartz walls of Lady Larrehne's bedroom.

He wondered, idly, whether such refinements were normal here, or whether 'sunrise' was reserved for their host's rare guests. Or, perhaps, contrived especially for this certain special guest?

He shrugged off the thought. It mattered not a whit, one way or the other; he was concerned with another matter, one not too far removed from The Balimann's flair for decoration.

Steifen sensed something unusual in the air, sensed it in a manner not readily explainable—for it was a sense he didn't share with real-men. It was on the order of a probability, based partially on the functioning of this unexplainable quality, and partly on common sense—a quality he *did* share with humanity.

The two senses told him there was an 84% probability that The Balimann had a method of observing Larrehne of Mourlin nude in her bath; and that there was a 97% probability that if he *did* have such a method—he was using it now.

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Steifen was enraged at the thought, even though he knew his Lady would not lower herself to consider such vulgarity important—nor permit him to take action against it.

Still, he filed the thought away. At least, it helped evolve a more complete picture of the many-faceted personality of The Balimann.

He dried the Lady Larrehne with the softest towels, and applied oils and powders to her body. He dressed her in a young Silkit whose tiny brain must surely have cried out in sorrow as its own texture touched that incredible flesh.

Instantly, Steifen was flooded with shame. It had happened again, and after he had burned and destroyed the cells and circuits that carried the fearful thing to his brain. The deadly thoughts, then, had not been his barriers and come to plague him again . . .

Steifen non-man was programmed for unstinting loyalty to Lady Larrehne—all that he had was hers—every thought her own possession for the asking. He could not tell her that he was indeed imperfect. This one thing he knew he could never share with her, and the thought shattered the crystals of his mind:

While he condemned The Balimann, and all others that lusted after her, he, her non-man, ached with that same longing. And what, he cried out, was more tragic than that? That a non-man be created with real-man emotions that could never in a million universes grow into reality?

VI

THE morning had hardly begun, and already, Steifen, with hate in his non-heart for The Balimann, and for himself, found himself hating still another!

It began normally enough, at breakfast, in The Balimann's ever-present psuedo-dawn. Again Steifen bowed to his host's taste. It was a green and dew-fresh garden; a sweet wind in the trees brought odors of a distant meadow, and it was easy to forget how achingly far, far, far this airless world lay from the meadows he remembered.

Even the Lady Larrehne was taken by the charm of this setting—and oh, The Balimann! All gloom of the night before had vanished, and he was again charm itself. His eyes shone like suns when his gaze fell upon Larrehne, and Steifen clenched his teeth and wondered if those eyes gleamed with the reflection of Larrehne of Mourlin clad in the light of a rose-quartz morning?

Then, the new man. It hap-

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pened so quickly Steifen's weapon was in his hand and the trigger half-depressed before he understood.

No one noticed his mistake at all—every eye was on something stranger than that. It was only a projection, but real enough to bring a startled cry from Larrehne and a curse from Balimann. At once, Steifen knew he had met Lord Garahnell, Master of Slaughterhouse.

"Hah! A*hah!*" The high-pitched voice matched the gaunt, spectral figure. A thin-lipped, red grin spread across a lean and nervous visage; a bony arm stretched out and a long finger uncurled in accusation.

Steifen looked about, wondering what great crime this stranger had discovered.

Garahnell loped toward them in great strides, his garish, archaic robes slurring across the marble beneath him. He stopped, suddenly, at the edge of the almost imperceptible glow that marked the limit of his projection, and his great cape dashed like foamy breakers across bony shoulders.

His fiery eyes rolled in a high circle, and rested on Larrehne, and for a quick moment Steifen saw, in shocked and painful familiarity, his own hunger mirrored.

Garahnell bowed low, sweeping a plumed hat from his head.

"Lady!" breathlessly, with gestures. "Let me say I am much relieved to find you safe and unharmed. Do not fear; even now my forces are mobilizing to effect your rescue!"

Steifen stared. What? What? A player's lines, memorized for the occasion? A sharper study, a deeper look into the eyes of this incredible man and he knew Lord Garahnell himself was not overly sure where the play ended and life began.

To what madhouse, Steifen wondered, *have I brought My Lady!*

Balimann, suddenly on his feet, knocking his chair over behind him, hands clenching like white claws, lips stretched across his teeth.

"Garahnell," said Balimann, his voice a velvet pouch full of tiny shards of glass, "you do me a discourtesy coming here without invitation. I excuse you—and beg that you leave now, and present yourself to the Lady Larrehne of Mourlin at a more suitable time."

Garahnell made a mock bow, grinning widely. "Well said, Wormkeeper! Well said! And that *suitable* time would be—when *you* have finished with her? Eh? Eh? Hah!"

Larrehne paled. The Balimann was livid, trembling with rage. He glanced quickly at Steifen.

Steifen, though, was coldly

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calm. He simply marked the man, and Garahnell spoke on borrowed time.

"Garahnell," hissed Balimann, "you—are—*warned!*" Steifen could see the shards, now, ripping through velvet.

Garahnell's brows lifted over dark eyes. "Warn? *Warn*, Wormkeeper? Say again *warn* when the air is sucked from the tunnels of that mudball of yours! Say again *warn* when Balimann's Moon is a dusty ring circling Slaughterhouse! Say—"

"Stop that, Lord Garahnell—instantly!" Larrehne's voice was brittle-blue ice.

Garahnell turned, his thin lips widening. "I offend, Lady?"

Larrehne shrugged. "I find you overly theatrical, Lord—and your remarks presumptuous. However, as you are here, let me say I wish to speak with you about an important matter. At your convenience."

Garahnell swirled his cape and showed white teeth. "Oh, speak we *will*, Lady! And soon!"

Again, the great cape swirled about scarecrow shoulders. "Do not resist me, Wormkeeper!" shrieked Garahnell. Balimann lunged forward, and the image faded as quickly as it had come.

Steifen stepped forward. "I must ask you, Lady, to accompany me at once to the *Gryphon*. I am at a loss to understand this man, but he is under the illusion you are a prisoner here. Balimann, I'm sure my Lady would be most happy to have you join us. I think you'll find the *Gryphon* as impregnable as you find it amusing."

Balimann laughed shortly. "There's little need for impregnability, non-man! You misunderstand the Lord Garahnell."

Larrehne's eyes flashed hotly. "Then I, too, misunderstand him, Balimann! He is either insane—or a fool!"

Balimann shook his head. "He is not the most likeable of men, Lady—but I know him—and he means no harm. Please. Will you come?" He moved a few steps from the table.

Larrehne stood, watching him with silent eyes. She placed her hand tightly in Steifen's and followed the Wormkeeper's steps.

VII

THE *Gryphon* shimmered in eternal night beyond the great window. Balimann pointed. Nothing.

Then: "Wait—ah, there!"

Larrehne strained forward, but a man's eyes are sharper than a woman's, and a non-man's sharper still. The hackles of his psuedo-hair began a long climb up along the length of Steifen's neck . . .

Like Garahnell himself, it was a parody. From the right, a fleet

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of one-man ships in perfect vee. They approached, broke clumsily, and formed a ragged, hovering ring around Balimann's Moon.

Grinning, Balimann flipped a long finger and the ships seemed touching close.

But even before, Steifen knew —he sensed them. He knew they were present, because it could be nothing else. *Sheegai!* His non-blood boiled. The Sheegai, condemned forever to the far rim and beyond, without even a planet of their own—this their punishment for that great and awesome crime against Man so long ago.

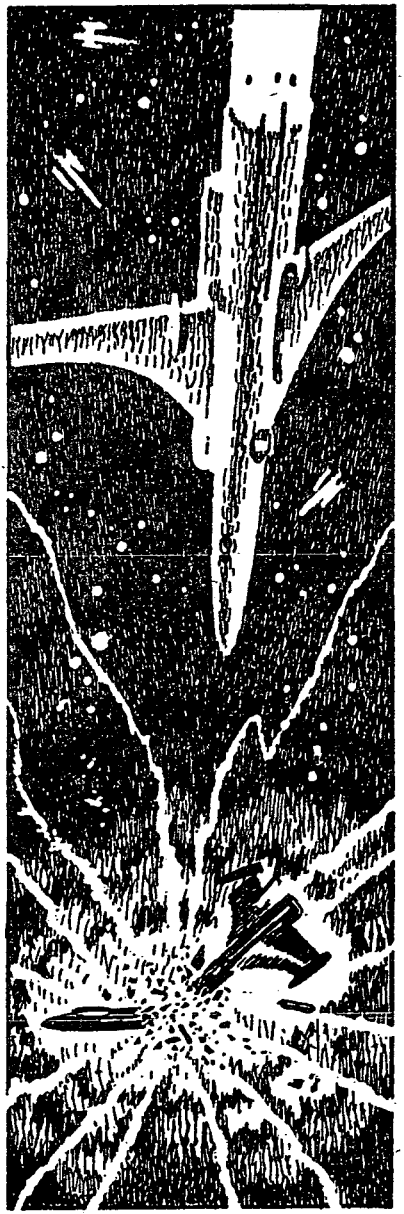
And now—a madman had put those black minds into fighting ships again!

Who else, Steifen asked himself, *could* it be? The ships bore the stamp of their maker, and he would have been amused if he could have forgotten the creatures who manned them. Those black, warty vessels resembled no ship that ever crossed the heavens. They were Garahnell's pointed symbols of Evil, complete with pathetic, shark-like faces on snubby bows.

Larrehne, too, saw little to laugh about. Her lovely eyes filled with violet fire. "Balimann —I find this intolerable!"

"Intolerable, Lady?" Balimann said dryly, "no longer madness, then?"

"It is more than madness to



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break the Covenant!" she snapped. "And *you*—your guilt is the greater, to know this and do nothing!"

"No, Lady," a little wearily, "I do nothing—because there is nothing that needs to be done. Look there!"

Steifen followed Larrehne's glance past Balimann's gesture. From the skies, vengeful angels fell in screaming silence. And as the black ships were Evil, so the white and gleaming hawks were symbols of Good. *Oh, Lord Garahnell,* Steifen sighed, *what a piteous child's game is this!*

Larrehne looked away, sharing the non-man's thoughts.

Hauteur vanished from Balimann's eyes. His features softened into weariness. "You see, don't you? He is no madman, Lady—no madder than us all. He merely does what he can to be Man—and there is little of that, even done in a manner such as this . . ."

The fleets clashed around them. Harmless fireballs of green, pink, lilac and white lit the sky. Blue petals blossomed against a hull of black Evil and a villain spun away in mock-death.

"You see how it is, Lady?" said Balimann. "My game is the study of an ugly enigma that lies or perhaps does not lie between here and Andromeda. You leap from star to star in a bird that is not a bird, with a man that is not a man. And Garahnell plays with war toys for his imprisoned Lady—who is neither his, imprisoned, nor likely to thank him for his troubles. Where, then, is the dream of Man?"

He shrugged, and his face was creased with purple sadness as another petal grew and blossomed outside the great window.

VIII

GARAHNELL'S strange actions revealed a different Balimann to Steifen. Pride turned to reflection—the mock and piteous war of his neighbor seemed to bring things to the fore of the Wormkeeper's thoughts that were easier to shrug off through lonely nights—more difficult in the presence of others.

Things are *not* the same here, thought Steifen. We are on the last sprinkled mote of sand before the great sea begins. And all great seas, he told himself, have a certain strangeness.

Balimann, and the Master of Slaughterhouse—both cardboard figures in the most bizarre of plays on a most lonely stage—meaningless, meaningless . . .

I *know* this, he told himself, and My Lady and I have no part in things that mean nothing. Whatever life this play mirrors, we will *not* become a part of it. I *will* believe that. . . !

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IX

WE came to see Slaughterhouse, and to view the Great Worm, Steifen. As is so often true, I think, one sometimes finds more than they look for."

Larrehne smiled. A tired smile, yes—but in it Steifen saw a hint of joy, of eagerness. For Lady Larrehne was ever the seeker, he knew; to her all knowledge was a step on the path to truth.

"My mind is with yours," said Steifen. "I sensed that you, too, felt we stood with one foot in reality and one in dreams, there before Balimann's window—with no way of knowing which foot belonged to what. It was most confusing, Lady."

Her eyes sparkled at his words. She leaned forward and pressed his hands tightly.

"Steifen—you saw this? I'm glad—so very glad!"

Steifen found it pleasant to be so near this loveliness—but a poor stimulus for the pondering of real-man philosophy; a thing difficult enough under the best of circumstances. Here, in the eternal rose-quartz dawn of her room, Larrehne's skin retained that quality it had captured in early morning, when he viewed the whole of it so longingly.

"Lady," he asked quickly, fearful that a child could read such thoughts, "I am a non-man, and can only pursue such questions in an academic manner, but, this thing we felt—it seemed akin to the subject of mystical phenomena—something we have spoken of before."

Larrehne closed her eyes. A finger rested delicately against the soft hair of her temple. "It is, I think, in the sense that we find ourselves feeling peculiarly detached from our surroundings. But," she sighed lightly, "I'm afraid it's a poor mystical experience, Steifen, if we can't tell whether we leave reality or approach it!"

Steifen said darkly, "If this playing at games, this Black against White business of Garahnell's is reality, then I prefer to let he and the Wormkeeper *have* such realities. I would rather be a puppet in some dream I somewhat understand."

Larrehne frowned. "Steifen, I haven't mentioned this before, but you've probably guessed it in one way or another. I've been most concerned since we began this voyage—and 'reality' is a big part of that concern. While I'm still a novice with the use of the Selfband, I've had several experiences lately which add greatly to my concern. I—well, I believe I've made contact with my Other, that higher Self which guides us all."

Steifen stood excitedly. "Lady! I'm very pleased!"

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She shook her head and brought him down beside her. "No, Steifen, it is much too early for congratulations. Guru McBain points out that there is much hard work for the seeker *after* the Other is found. Still, as I say, though these first contacts have been little more than ghostly whisperings—I am *most* disturbed . . ."

"Lady, in what way?"

"I don't think we've been faced with a choice between reality and unreality, Steifen. It is becoming clear to me that the very strangeness of Balimann's Moon and Slaughterhouse points to a greater truth.

"As you know, McBain teaches that *all* is unreality in this life; a most difficult barrier for even the most advanced of seekers to cross!"

Steifen released a deep breath. "Real-man philosophy again! We have spoken of this, Lady—and it occurs to me our experiences today are no very telling demonstration of Guru McBain's teachings."

Larrehne brightened. "But don't you *see?* They are, they are!"

Steifen shrugged. "I'm sorry, Lady. I cannot see it as clearly as you."

"Why, then," she said excitedly, "is the life we left in such sharp contrast to this one? Why—as you have put it—do we feel one foot in reality and the other in a dream? Isn't it because these worlds on the gulf of emptiness are mirrors of the worlds we left?

"Is there a more cutting parody of the Good and Evil we have known back there, than Garahnell's mock war—or the birth-death of Slaughterhouse? When I think of the life we left—Oh, Steifen, it's hard to say which nightmare mirrors the other!"

Steifen is saddened by these thoughts, and the sadness colors his voice. "It seems a picture of futility to me, Lady—not a thing Guru McBain would wish to conclude. Still, perhaps I've become even more fuddled in my thinking than I was when you began. This is very possible."

Larrehne favored him with a gentle smile. "My friend, I'd never accuse you of befuddlement. You are, of course, a born pessimist, and this tends to tip the scales of your reasoning toward the darkest conclusion."

"This, too," he agreed, "is possible. I only pray your eternal hope can tip those scales the other way."

"And that," she answered wryly, "is either flattery or sarcasm—but certainly not philosophy! Still, I accept your challenge. We have yet to see the greatest enigma this dream world of yours has to offer—remember?"

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"No, I haven't forgotten, and I'm not likely to," said Steifen. "And Lady, please don't refer to this as 'my' dream world. I claim not a particle of it for myself. Also, if the enigma you speak of is The Worm, and I am sure it is—we must carry the classification of dreams a step further into that of nightmares. No, I'm not at all heartened by this last great challenge . . ."

X

WHILE Steifen was bound to heed his Lady's wishes, he was also programmed to evaluate. Thus, he exercised discrimination, and spared her the job of editing sense from nonsense. This faculty of discrimination also freed him to protect her from subjects he did not feel served to further her sense of well-being. He never glossed over harsh truth—he merely refrained from repeating every painful experience.

For this reason, he made it quite clear to The Balimann that she was not to be informed of Garahnell's gifts, which he viewed in the lock where Balimann had been sensible enough to confine them.

"Rather charming—in a way," mused Balimann.

"In a way that's rather obvious, if I may say so," Steifen answered.

They *were* supple and lovely creatures, and Lord Garahnell had given them the most attractive attributes of the human female—but they curled about the legs of Steifen and Balimann, and preened themselves, purring in a vibrant, deep-throated *hummmmmmm—hrrrmmmm* that was essentially feline. Their eyes denied any hint of humanity, and in the end they were simply female cats in what appeared to Steifen to be a state of perpetual heat.

Outside, he faced Balimann stiffly. "Just what did Garahnell have in mind for My Lady to *do* with these creatures? I see but one use for them; if I am right, this is the foulest of insults to Larrehne of Mourlin!"

Balimann shifted nervously. He inspected a fleck of lint on his sleeve. "I—don't believe Garahnell meant anything unseemly or distasteful by this. His viewpoint differs from yours—or mine," he added quickly. "I imagine he felt these creatures would make excellent handmaidens for a great Lady."

"Hmmmm. Anything is possible," Steifen said dryly. "But I fear your neighbor is again projecting his own bizzare tastes onto others."

"All right," sighed Balimann sharply, "perhaps he is, nonman!" Balimann turned and stalked off down the long hall.

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He glanced quickly, almost imperceptivly, back at the closed port.

Steifen, who saw things a real-man might miss, knew he would never be able to decide whether Garahnell's gifts found their way back to Slaughterhouse . . .

XI

ANOTHER incident Steifen did not report to his Lady: On the other side of the great window, which he asked to be closed, the battle of the white hawks and black demons still raged. Lord Garahnell's quest continued for the Lady imprisoned in his own mind . . .

XII

WITHOUT the distraction of the great mock war, Balimann's study, where Steifen and his host waited for Larrehne to complete her meditations, was a pleasant and comfortable place. Vaulted ceiling rose above real wooden beams in a manner so ancient that few could have said what period was reflected there. The fireplace contained real wood, too—and the Almighty knew where Balimann obtained such a thing. Steifen had seen only one other—in the home of Larrehne's father, where he had begun life, and served until the Master of Mourlin's death.

Balimann, across from Steifen, leaned forward before the crackling flames to fill their glasses with dark wine.

"You know," he said curtly, "you have no need to worry. I am not quite the crude outworlder you mark me as."

Steifen looked up. "What is this, Balimann?"

"You need not concern yourself that I will speak of Garahnell's gift. That is what I mean!" He turned fiery eyes on Steifen. "You judge too lightly and too quickly, non-man. In this, you do your Lady a great disservice."

"I do not need you to tell me how to serve my Lady," Steifen said stiffly. "However, if I have said anything to offend you—"

"Ha!" Balimann was on his feet, an accusing finger aimed at Steifen's chest. "You see? You do it again! Non-man, do you think I live or die on your opinion of me, or Lord Garahnell, or —or those bitchcats in the airlock! God in Heaven—protect me from the ego of the galactic!"

Balimann downed his wine too quickly, and twin red lines stained his cheeks and turned to dark spots on his tunic. Still, the storm seemed to have died, and he continued in a quieter tone.

"Believe what I say, or ignore it—as you choose," he said. "Your over-hasty judgments concern me in only one respect: When you shrug The Balimann

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aside, you toss his words out in the same bundle—and my words, non-man, are not to be taken lightly!"

Steifen, irritated, said: "*You* give them out lightly, my friend."

Balimann hesitated, then nodded in quick understanding. "Yes. My light banter with your Lady was a mistake—perhaps. I did not realize how serious she was about—The Worm. I do now. It will not happen again. That did not work so I have, frankly, changed my personality to suit the need. And I will continue to change it for her until I can convince that stubborn Lady—or you—that it is very possibly worth your *life* to look at that thing!"

Steifen watched the man a long moment. Finally, he nodded. "Perhaps, Balimann. And perhaps I have misjudged some of your motives. Still, I can tell you My Lady has her reasons for taking whatever chance exists. She knows the stories—and she will not be dissuaded."

"It is her life—her sanity," Balimann said coldly. "But I will continue to try. I could not forgive myself if I didn't. Perhaps I would feel better if I knew *why* she feels this great need to come here at all. You have not volunteered this information—nor has she. I haven't pried for it. Now I suppose I am."

"My Lady has told you—"

Balimann shrugged disdainfully. "Yes. You have come to see Slaughterhouse and The Worm. That wasn't my question, was it? *Why?* The Lady Larrehne is no simple tourist, flitting about the rim of creation in that fantastic bird!"

Steifen looked abstractedly into the fire. His glass made a hollow sound in the quiet room as he placed it on the table before him.

"You are only partially right, Balimann. Seeing Slaughterhouse and The Worm are not my Lady's end motives. There is a great deal more to it than that. I see no reason why you should not hear the story, since you, yourself, have now become a part of it . . ."

XIII

LADY Larrehne is an exceptional person, Balimann. In these dark times, when ignorance seems the fashion, *she* seeks ever to expand her knowledge. She is, of course, in a good position to do so. The House of Mourlin has interests in many systems, and little happens on a thousand worlds that does not reach our ears. Thus, a great business empire holds itself together.

"Through these same channels, information often comes

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our way that has little to do with Mourlin business—bits and pieces from here and there that may mean nothing viewed separately —but can often mean a great deal when the parts are fitted together."

Steifen shifted in his chair and took a deep breath. He leaned back and looked at The Balimann. "It was in this way, through her study of certain dispatches over a period of time, that My Lady began to realize something was gravely wrong. There were reports of strange, grotesque animals being sold for pets on Centallia. It was rumoured that a man on Bagdar had three Piggies who wore shirts and shoes and accompanied him about his business. Our man on Garalando reported Baabaas were much in demand for personal servants . . .

"We knew at once where these creatures *had* to come from—Slaughterhouse. There was no other possibility. Lord Garahnell's interests had expanded from the production of meat to the creation of semi-intelligent life-forms!

"We had already had the dubious pleasure of visiting one of the FTL receivers long before. It is not a pretty sight, as I'm sure you know. Food means nothing to me, of course—but My Lady has not touched meat since that time. And I don't believe many who saw that operation would go away with different feelings. It is not so much slaughter of animals that offends—the things are long dead and space-frozen when they pop out of no-space. It is the *appearance* of the things that offend—stubby, weak legs, strong enough to propel them from the wombrings to the senders, enough heart and lung to run the pitiful legs, and an ounce or so of brain sacked neatly away with the other organs. — And no head, of course; since there is no need for eyes, mouth or tract. I think this detail offended My Lady more than anything."

Steifen shook his head. "With this memory still fresh in her mind, and the distressing reports of Garahnell's new enterprise before her, My Lady was in no mood for the next event that happened. We attended a party given by a certain wealthy man on Farvir, and for the first time, had the opportunity to see Garahnell's handiwork face to face."

Steifen grimaced. "I won't describe them. I will say only that the party was a bizarre and ugly success—My Lady and I left before too many vulgarities were performed.

"I've met many aliens in my long life," Steifen sighed, "and strange as many of them were, still, they *were what they were*—not intentional parodies of Man,

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things with snouts and hooves and fur designed to mock humanity. God knows, humanity itself is mockery enough these days!"

BALIMANN was silent a long moment. "I see," he said finally. "I know, of course, Garahnell has spent no little ingenuity on the design of these—grotesqueries. I had no idea he was exporting the creatures! —And turning a pretty profit, I'm sure!"

His brow deepened and he looked steadily at Steifen. "I am no saint, my friend—I don't pretend to be. There's a certain perverse fascination about those creatures in my airlock—no use denying that. Any man could see it. Garahnell's manufactured an attractive new toy, and I expect the jaded galactic will be more than delighted!

"I frankly deplore what Garahnell has done. I *hope* I'm still a cut above that galactic mind. Yes—if your Lady is concerned with the moral fibre of her fellow man, she has good reason."

Steifen let out a deep sigh.

"That's not all of it, Balimann —I only wish it were . . ."

"What?"

Steifen smiled grimly. "Do you think *she* has travelled beyond the rim of the galaxy because of a—'perverse fascination?'"

The non-man stood, leaning close over The Balimann's chair.

"Look at *me*, real-man. What do you see? Look closely and you'll see a thing as unhuman as that chair—or this wine glass! I'm a *non-man*. I look like you and speak like you and think like you, but there's not an ounce of flesh or a drop of blood about me. I live forever—and I was never born! I can be destroyed —but I cannot die!" Steifen paused. "Now, Balimann, what is the difference between me—and Garahnell's creatures?"

Balimann forwned. "This is—unnecessary. I know what you are. You have no reason to compare yourself with them . . ."

"Exactly," Steifen nodded. "No reason at all. We're both creations of Man—but one is merely unnatural, while the other is *artificial*."

Steifen laughed. "Ironic isn't it? Your unnatural creation shares your higher functions—while your flesh and blood monsters have every one of your base, low desires! A non-man has no stomach, but he drinks your wine—he isn't cold, but he warms himself by your fire. *I* share your emotional capabilities, Balimann, with a brain that responds to all real-man emotions. I'm mentally, if not physically, very capable of *enjoying* this wine and that fire—perhaps more capable than you!"

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Steifen sank back into his chair. Balimann looked blank.

"I'm sorry," Steifen said, "I—hoped it would help you to understand. Don't you see, now, what concerns My Lady? *I* can never become Man—but I can't become an animal, either. Garahnell's creatures can never, *never* become Man—there is no danger in that. But somehow—in a way that defies all understanding—the Master of Slaughterhouse has made possible a terrible—and *fruitful*—union. *And now Man can become an animal!*"

Balimann paled. The wine glass fell from his fingers, shattered, and red droplets hissed into the fire . . .

XIV

BALIMANN looked up, finally. The color was drained from his dark face, and life seemed to have left his limbs.

"Man has infinite potential for reaching unimaginable heights," he said harshly, "or inventing new ways of debasing himself. He has discovered the final method." Balimann turned away, staring into the dying coals.

Steifen noded. "Two creatures—are under study in Mourlin's laboratories. They are both very young, of course—not more than a few weeks old. But already we know we are dealing with an essentially animal mind—there is no potential for great intelligence. But—*cunning!* I don't believe there is anything that can match them there."

Balimann looked up. He faced Steifen, but his eyes were far away. "I am a man who knows his own race too well, non-man. Even when they know the price they must pay for this pleasure, it will make no difference—I don't know what will stop them—until every world is crawling with snuffling beasts . . ."

"Nor do I," Larrehne's voice came softly, "but I know it is a question that *must* be answered."

Even Steifen was unaware of her presence. He turned as she stepped from the shadows. Before he could rise, her hand rested on his shoulder.

"I'm glad Steifen has confided in you, Balimann; I always approve his discretions, and I concur in this one. I hope the viewpoint of one so close to this problem will prove helpful."

Larrehne dropped down beside Steifen, and Balimann rose to pour her wine.

"I am shaken by what the non-man has told me, Lady. And while I can offer you no ready answer, I am certainly at your service. I know, now, I believe, what your business is with Garahnell. And *you* must know, now that you've spoken to him once—that speaking to him again will

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gain you nothing." He shook his head. "That one will not stop what he is doing."

"No," she said, "I've tried to fool myself into thinking he might yet listen to reason—but I know he will not . . ."

Steifen tensed. His eyes were suddenly cold. "He will listen if *I* speak, Lady. He will listen, and understand."

Larrehne smiled sadly. "I knew you would have to make that offer, old friend. It has ever been on your mind, hasn't it? Ah, Steifen—you would destroy a world? Even a world of monsters?"

"*He* would destroy a galaxy, Lady. A galaxy of men who would *be* monsters!"

Larrehne turned. "And you, Balimann?"

"In a second, Lady. I would happily fight the non-man for the privilege. I see no other way."

"Nor do I," she said, a strange smile passing briefly across her face. "Somehow I knew this—long before we came. I knew the answer would not come from Garahnell. I knew then, Balimann, that it could only come from you . . ."

Balimann stared. "From—*me!*"

"I *know what happened here*, Balimann. At least, I know a part of it. I know that Man reached out, and stood here on the beach where his small pond swelled into the great sea. I know he looked out over that sea, toward the far island of Andromeda; looked, and saw what was waiting for him there. I know he turned, and fled back to the Thousand Worlds to scatter the seeds of his shame and despair."

She looked up at Balimann, and her eyes burned with violet fire. "*This* is where Garahnell's monsters were born—*here*, ten thousand years ago, at the moment when a newborn giant turned into a stunted dwarf." She shook her head slowly, and a sad smile again creased her face. "What can a man in a cage do, Balimann—but turn into a beast?"

Balimann looked at Larrehne with new respect. "You know much of the story, Lady. I wish, with all my heart, that I could deny you the rest of it. I cannot."

She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "For that I truly thank you . . ."

"I hope I never regret the decision, Lady. I pray I will not." He turned the stem of his glass so it caught the final spark of the dying fire. "I haven't asked what you hope to find in the image of The Worm. I haven't, and I will not. Perhaps you will find an answer to a question I cannot answer myself."

"And that question?"

"Simply, Lady: can we blame Man for erasing what he saw

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from the memory of his race?"

Larrehne favored him with a gentle smile. Her eyes were dark stars, very near him, but incalculable years away. "That question has been a part of me too long now, Balimann. A deadly shadow has fallen over Man; he is dying in its darkness—I would see what casts a shadow such as that. . . ."

XV

IT seemed strange to Steifen that the lift should plunge them down toward the center of Balimann's Moon, when the object of their search lay in the deep seas between the galaxies. But, as The Balimann cryptically explained, "There are observatories, non-man—then there are *observatories* . . ."

Lady Larrehne's eyes tilted in a question, and Balimann continued:

"Balimann's Moon houses no ordinary instrument—I assure you. It was not made for staring at dust-mote worlds or puny constellations. It was built, by the first Balimann, for one purpose only—to probe the very heart of Andromeda. And that, Lady, it can do—and more.

"For this, an immense amount of energy is required—and energy we have, the unlimited power of the stars themselves! It is all around us now, stolen from the cores of a million angry giants, and locked in the center of Balimann's Moon."

That power was there, an unbelievable, terrible surging force, Steifen could not deny. The deeper the lift plunged, the heavier this force weighed upon his senses.

It was a strange feeling for the non-man. He knew the deep, throbbing power of great space carriers, the howling, unchained monsters that plunged across the Barrier as wind rips through a spider's web. An imperceptible coldness pressed against him—this was something different. An age-old thing, but shiny new. A prize that fell from Man's hip pocket when he fled the Great Gulf in terror and scattered his belongings to the dark winds . . .

The lift slowed gently and heaviness returned. The door slid open with a tiny sigh. Balimann moved aside, and Larrehne and Steifen stepped out.

A tiny bulb above the lift door was the only light. Whatever lay beyond its glow was clothed in darkness.

"Please be prepared," Balimann warned. "I can't explain it to you, but the effect is unusual." He turned away and pressed something behind him.

Steifen flinched as brightness exploded around him. Larrehne's strong fingers tightened on his arm and he caught the sound of

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her quick gasp of breath. He blinked, looked away, closed his eyes. He opened them again and dizziness returned. A billion tiny Steifens shook their heads and returned his stare.

"Steifen! Steifen, I—" He clutched her arm as she swayed and Balimann made a swift movement. The room darkened and a single dim light circled the carpet beneath them.

"I'm sorry," said Balimann, "it takes some time before you are accustomed to it."

"No," smiled Larrehne weakly, "I'm all right now. Just—dizzy, I think. It is a strange illusion—as if I were trapped in the center of some gigantic jewel!"

"It is no illusion, Lady. We are at the bottom of a large, spheroid room—shaped much like that of an egg. The dizziness and confusion are caused by a multitude of tiny, reflective shards of silvered crystal which project the image of the stars from receivers on the surface. It is the perfection of these projecting planes which rob the eye of balance, and leave it no point of reference. It is also," he continued, "the factor that makes Balimann's Moon unequaled by any observatory in the galaxy. It has been so for ten thousand years, and I think it may not be surpassed for ten thousand more —or never, perhaps, unless the worlds of men change their courses."

"The perfection of these instruments, Balimann," said Steifen dryly, "has already changed the course of Man once. Had your ancestor's image of The Worm been *less* than perfect, perhaps the road to Andromeda would be filled with ships, now —and your race reaching out instead of turning in upon itself."

"Steifen!" Larrehne said sharply, "that was most unfair!"

Steifen shrugged. "There was no offense intended toward The Balimann, Lady. I was merely indulging in irony again."

Balimann laughed grimly. "And you're right, of course, non-man! The successful explorer is the one ignorant of the terrors he faces over the horizon. The Great Captains who gathered here a hundred centuries ago didn't have that advantage —Oh, no, they definitely did not!"

SUDDENLY, his hand swept out in a deft, practiced movement. Lights sprang on beside them, circling a shallow bowl at the base of the spheroid hall. Larrehne and Steifen turned as sudden movement caught their eyes.

Dark iris shadows hummed, widening on the azure carpet in neat rows. Black-sheathed, silver stalks pushed into the light,

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sang, hissed, filled the amphitheatre with alien wheat that suddenly bloomed, spread black wings and flashed silver limbs——*snap!*—into rigid silence . . .

"It is a humbling thing," whispered Larrehne, "to see legend come to life. Even one that died unborn."

She gazed out over the silent rows, the dark and empty thrones. She read the silver-hued crests emblazoned on black, spelled the names so long unknown—DeLoyega, Graham-Martin, Pieter, Vashiel. . . .

Larrehne stopped. She squinted at a crest too much in shadow, and suddenly knew it was no shadow at all. It was dark, aged—almost ancient among the cold-silver names around it.

"You cannot read it, Lady," said Balimann. "That name is burned from the rolls of the Great Captains. But I know it—it is Marshekian."

Balimann looked long at the dark and twisted crest. Then he turned away in sadness. "This is the rest of the story, Lady. The part that does not even live in legend; but only in the heart of The Balimann.

"They gathered here, The Hundred, The Great Captains. Their ships circled this moon like giant, hungry hounds, power throbbing in their angry souls, waiting for their masters to turn them loose across the void. But their masters were here, and they had just seen what waited for them there, in the Great Gulf.

"The Captain of Captains," Balimann went on, "was Stergoffsenn, a giant with flaming red hair. When it was all over, he rose and turned to them, a sea of brave men's faces gone pale and slack. Seeing those faces, he must have known; but he tried to cover his own fear—and theirs—with his fierce and blazing eyes. He told them, simply, calmly, that they would return to their ships, that nothing had changed, nothing—they would sail into the Great Sea, demon or no demon, and the first man to bolt would feel the heat of his blaster."

"And Marshekian," said Larrehne softly, suddenly understanding the darkness of the chair's crest, "Marshekian was the first . . ."

Balimann nodded. "He was, Lady. And a finer, braver man has never lived, so the legends say. He stood, slowly, facing the Captain of Captains. 'No,' he said, we are going home, Stergoffsenn. We are going home, now.' And Stergoffsenn looked at him with deep understanding, and raised his blaster and fired.

"Then he turned away, dropped the weapon; his great head shaking in his hands. Stergoffsenn wept shamelessly for

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the first time in his long life . . .

"Then" Balimann said grimly, "the Captains, no longer the Great Ones, no longer The Hundred, but merely men, now, lowered their heads and left the two alone—Marshekian, dead; Marshekian, most dearly beloved brother of Stergoffsenn, who died because his brother had asked him, with his eyes, to let him be chosen; to let him die for all the rest.

"And when the others had gone, Stergoffsenn covered his brother with his own golden cape, and wept no more. He gazed up into the heights of this very room, where a moment before the terrible image had appeared to wreck men's dreams. Then he looked once more at the quiet shape under the golden cape, and Balimann pointed, "to the right of where the non-man stands."

Larrehne and Steifen caught the hint of darkness stained on azure blue, death ten thousand years old, and turned away.

Balimann glanced at Larrehne, then the non-man. He let his eyes rest on the woman. "You are still ready, Lady? After the story is finished?" He gestured toward the hundred black and silver thrones behind her.

"I am, Balimann." She drew herself up, straight and tall. "But you will have to make other seating arrangements, I fear. I'm sorry, but I find that with a wealth of chairs there is not a one I care for."

Balimann smiled softly. "Ghosts, Lady? Surely not."

"If you will," she said distantly, her eyes resting beyond the pool of light, beyond, even, the darkness above. "These thrones of The Hundred carry enough of a burden now, Balimann. I can sense this, and I know Steifen feels much he does not say. If I fail, too, then it would be a sad thing to drape another mantle of guilt over this poor furniture, would it not? . . ."

XVI

INDEED, the non-man sensed much he kept to himself—but the strange, ice-borne thoughts added more to puzzlement than knowledge.

What was *happening* to him! For a quick second he felt near-panic, a real-man emotion he had never known. As the lights dimmed, and the caressing arms of his couch enfolded him, he gazed up into darkness. A deep shudder trembled through his body. The thoughts that flooded in upon him were a strange mixture of non-man prescience and human fear and superstition. He was born—he was dying. A dark shadow bore down upon him with awesome speed . . .

He laughed hollowly to himself. This, then, the moment he

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had feared for *her!* And now, fingers tight against his thighs, psuedo-sweat beading on synthetic brows, he sensed no fear from the form on the couch beside him. No. Fear was much closer than the Lady Larrehne.

My God! My God! What is happening to me!! He bit his lip until busy invisible nodes signaled psuedo-flesh was being damaged.

He lay back in his chair, trembling, as his body manufactured and bathed him in unfamiliar acid. Steifen, learning a brand new human emotion after all these years—one every real-man child was better equipped to handle. Steifen the non-man, shivering, eyes wide-staring in blackness, afraid of the dark. . . .

. . . Calmness returned. Non-man controls clamped down on errant emotions; did not destroy, and negate the usefulness of these new things, but came to a silent understanding between the subjective and objective impact of fear on the electronic psyche.

The wave swept over him, abated, was replaced with controlled understanding. He became aware of physical sensation again, dimly aware of The Balimann himself. Somewhere, the gaunt frame bowed tautly over a bubble of blackness; strong fingers flicked through clusters of singing lights that sucked the power of the stars, and held far galaxies squeezed within the high dome . . .

Steifen floated over black seas. He gazed down, let his vision sink in dark water . . . deep . . . deep . . . deep . . .

Below, a dim shape swimming in velvet currents. Larger . . . larger . . . a luminous pearl, a lamp's soft glow through midnight fog . . .

Softness cracked wide! Pearl shattered! Diamond brilliance crashed out, broke free in aching streaks of splintered color. Needle shards of brittle-green ice-blue bloodsharp-red pierced darkness. Cold, cold, cold . . . Andromeda! A black, depthless sea—and on the other side—Andromeda . . . Andromeda . . .

Then . . . gone! Steifen blinked. No, it was there—but Balimann had dimmed the jewel galaxy to a pale ghost. It was there, afterimage gray, and before it, between Steifen and faint Andromeda—

A sharp chill of apprehension jolted him. Muscles tightened toward pain. *Now! Now! Now!* Plastic veins sprayed cold acid through steel bones.

Then: What? What? *What?* No. That isn't it. Not yet. But he knew it was. Ice melted. Relief

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flooded in warmly, and Steifen laughed aloud.

It was appalling, beyond belief! Mentally, he stamped out a legend with his finger, blotted out ten thousand years of terror with the joint of a thumb. This lacy filament of green, a nebulous wisp of starry ribbon—twisted vaguely like a worm, yes—but Lord, no Eater of Worlds!

Balimann raised the magnification, and green filament became a jade-ice necklace tossed on velvet . . .

Again—now it stretched across the whole range of vision, big enough to see a billion clusters of tiny emerald suns . . .

Again—a single cluster of the brilliant, crowded suns, spun together with misty olive webs . . .

And again—a dozen green suns, alone; some aching brilliant, some merely bright, and some blurred behind dim veils, all imbued with flowing movement, and—

—AGAIN!

AGAIN!

AGAIN . . .!

XVII

. . . How long, now, has it been? How far, how far . . .?

THESE are things I cannot answer—such questions are meaningless to me. In the Control Room of the *Gryphon*, a thousand shiny eyes that saw and measured everything now see nothing. All the quivering needles sleep silently against red zeros. . . .

One thing I know—*some* measure of time and distance separates my 'now' from the things that happened on Balimann's Moon.

How many non-miles and no-years lie between, I cannot say. I sit alone in a great lost ship and stare at silent clocks, imagining that frozen hands move again. As a blind man savors the memory of that last bright moment, I, too, reach back and taste every jewel second of real-time.

. . . Balimann's face is frozen forever in my 'now.' Every line, every twisted plane—just as it was when my shadow touched him and he turned to show me his fear.

I felt great anger for him then. I weighed that fear, and knew it was stronger than any grief for her. But I did nothing. He was a real-man. I expected no more.

I brushed him aside, and for a long moment stood gazing down at My Lady. I closed my eyes, reached out and sensed the gentle quietness in her mind, the soft stillness of her heart. Of my thoughts, then, my feelings—I shall say nothing. These things belong to me.

"Non-man—please!"

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My dream shattered. I turned away from her, slowly, opened my eyes, and let anger rise and turn my arms to tight cords.

"She is dead," said Balimann. "She—is dead. I—know . . ." His voice was an urgent whisper, a moth beating nervously against the flame. He was watching me. Very carefully. Anxiously. His fear was a great thing within him.

"Still," he chattered, "still, there are things that *can* be done —sometimes. You know? A chance, non-man—!"

Somewhere, he had found a Re-Lifer. It floated beside him, rocking gently, humming its soft red tune. His eyes darted from me to the Re-Lifer, and back again. He bit his lip, hesitated.

"We must—try," he said, "if we wait longer—"

He suddenly jerked forward, tried to push past me. I gripped his arm in steel. He stared at me, paled, and I let him go. He fell back, rubbing the numbness.

I laughed, and his eyes widened as the harsh sound broke the stillness. "*You*, real-man, and that poor machine with its hummings and groanings? You think you can reach *her*, now? You think that is *all* you have to do? New lungs with new air—a new heart pumping with vitality and life? And what are you going to do, Balimann—wire her *soul* together again?"

He stepped back quickly, and I turned away from him and gathered that small, silent form in my arms. Then I walked across the deep carpet toward the blue glow of the lift.

"All right!" he yelled after me. "*Kill* me, then, if you will—But I *will speak!* You blame *me* for this! I know—I can see that and I *will not* bear that burden for you—!"

I turned slowly and looked at him. "No *false man* can place that upon me!" he said harshly. "I gave you warning—*you* could have stopped her—and you *did not*. I couldn't stop *you*, false man—even though I *knew what was there*, felt—"

"Do not tell me what you feel, Wormkeeper," I said tiredly. "Please. I know what you feel. I can read those things as if they were written in the air before your eyes. You *feel* that I might kill you. You *feel* that you might suffer. Other than this, there is little in you . . ."

"That *isn't true!* I did not *want* this! I *warned* you—!"

I shook my head. "Warn? And how could you *warn*, Balimann? Do you think I do not know, now? No one knows better than I, real-man. *You cannot warn others of things you have not seen yourself!*"

His face went white and his whole body staggered backwards.

"I *have* seen!"

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"No. You have walked a little way into the forest, perhaps. You know the shadows of the beasts that dwell there. But you sent My Lady and I along the deeper path—the one you feared to walk."

I held him with my eyes and he did not move. "This is your crime, Balimann. You are not The Worm's keeper. It—is yours!"

Something broke inside him. All the man spilled out and left a hollow thing standing in its place. I turned away, and let the lift enclose me. I did not need to kill this real-man for his perfidy: He could take care of his own dissolution better than I. . . .

. . . Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps Balimann will once more find his manhood. It may be that when the beasts swarm over his moon—as they will, I know; there, and on the many worlds of the Great Wheel—then, perhaps, the spark will glow again, and he will fire until his weapon is hot and empty, and die with the laugh of heroes on his lips.

I hope this is so. I hope the blood of past greatness returns to the veins of man. For men *did* know greatness once, I know. The Great Captains fled when they saw their enemy—yes. But they *still knew* the shame they brought upon themselves. In that time, they failed as a man fails.

They *were men*—they could not have faced what they did and come away without madness if they had not been men. There are not even non-men like that. I, too, went insane at the sight of the enemy, for I am an imitation of man, and no better.

But I am also a machine, and a machine can sometimes correct the tangled, twisted circuits of madness. It is not so easy with a man.

What, then, did I see, there in the darkness of Balimann's observatory? What do I know of the thing that is the Nightmare of Man? I know all—and I know nothing. I know that something *seems* to be coming from Andromeda. I know that sometimes it is coming at a great, incredible speed—and sometimes it is not there at all. I know that it cannot be measured, recorded, or classified. I know that I cannot describe its horror so that another will understand it—because its form is not form, its shape is not shape. It is *there*, in the great nebula of The Worm. Again, it is not there at all. But it *feels* there . . .

I see there is no way. I cannot tell you of the thing itself, but only of the nightmares it brings—the projection of the thing that it really *is*. And this—is close enough to madness.

Sometimes I can see them, chittering and howling in the veiled green cloud. Sometimes I

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see a black, ape-like thing that turns into a loathsome, mindless creature like the most terrible of sea-things. There are a million—a billion of them. All of them are different—all are the same.

Sometimes they die—or cry—or pray—or entwine themselves in unexplainable obscenities. More often, even this shadow projection of The Worm is so alien that I cannot say what they do. Perhaps that is what The Worm itself is—a projection of some other, more alien and unexplainable creature. And that creature. . . .

This is all I can convey to you. And it is nothing—nothing. I know only that I travel at speeds I cannot know toward this great enigma. Toward the brightness of Andromeda, and the green cloud that hangs before it. It is a journey that passes in a second—or a million years—I do not know. I cannot.

My Lady sleeps, still and silent, in the death that is not death, but something else I cannot explain. It is the death I could not—would not—convey to Balimann.

She is here—somewhere—with me. Her body rests in the great Control Room in the eye of *The Gryphon*—and it is she who sends us on through no-space and no-time—it is she who would not let me turn Garahnell's world into a great sun, would not let me destroy the beasts mankind nurtures in his soul. This is not her way, this changing of destinies. Her way is another, and I obey her silent wishes that whisper about me.

This is her way. We left the beasts that spawn from within far behind—and face the beast that comes from without . . .

There is, then, but one thing more. . . .

I cannot understand it and I try not to think upon it. I know, that while we lay there, My Lady and I, in Balimann's observatory, she reached out and gently touched my mind with hers. We lay there and watched the horror come in upon us, and for that moment, we were one.

It was only for a moment. She could not take me where she was going—but she *wanted* me to see—to know—to *understand.* I saw. But I did not understand. I saw evil, horror and sensed what they were—but I did not understand. I know only this:

I saw my gentle Lady reach out with a cry of great joy and embrace these obsecenities and take them to her, as a woman takes a lover she has waited for through long eternities . . .

I, Steifen non-man, saw only loathesome evil. What did she see, that I did not? Why does she embrace what all men flee? I do not know. *I do not know. . . .*

THE END

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SURVIVAL TACTICS

By AL SEVCIK

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

The robots were built to serve Man; to do his work, see to his comforts, make smooth his way. Then the robots figured out an additional service—putting Man out of his misery.

THERE was a sudden crash that hung sharply in the air, as if a tree had been hit by lightning some distance away. Then another. Alan stopped, puzzled. Two more blasts, quickly together, and the sound of a scream faintly.

Frowning, worrying about the sounds, Alan momentarily forgot to watch his step until his foot suddenly plunged into an ant hill, throwing him to the jungle floor. "Damn!" He cursed again, for the tenth time, and stood uncertainly in the dimness. From tall, moss shrouded trees, wrist-thick vines hung quietly, scraping the spongy ground like the tenticles of some monstrous tree-bound octopus. Fitful little plants grew straggly in the shadows of the mossy trunks, forming a dense underbrush that made walking difficult. At midday some few of the blue sun's rays filtered through to the jungle floor, but now, late afternoon on the planet, the shadows were long and gloomy.

Alan peered around him at the vine draped shadows, listening to the soft rustlings and faint twig snappings of life in the jungle. Two short, popping sounds echoed across the stillness, drowned out almost immediately and silenced by an explosive crash. Alan started, "Blaster fighting! But it can't be!"

Suddenly anxious, he slashed a hurried X in one of the trees to mark his position then turned to follow a line of similar marks back through the jungle. He tried to run, but vines blocked his way and woody shrubs caught at his legs, tripping him and holding him back. Then,

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through the trees he saw the clearing of the camp site, the temporary home for the scout ship and the eleven men who, with Alan, were the only humans on the jungle planet, Waiamea.

Stepping through the low shrubbery at the edge of the site, he looked across the open area to the two temporary structures, the camp headquarters where the power supplies and the computer were; and the sleeping quarters. Beyond, nose high, stood the silver scout ship that had brought the advance exploratory party of scientists and technicians to Waiamea three days before. Except for a few of the killer robots rolling slowly around the camp site on their quiet treads, there was no one about.

"So, they've finally got those things working." Alan smiled slightly. "Guess that means I owe Pete a bourbon-and-soda for sure. Anybody who can build a robot that hunts by homing in on animals' mind impulses. . . ." He stepped forward just as a roar of blue flame dissolved the branches of a tree, barely above his head.

Without pausing to think, Alan leaped back, and fell sprawling over a bush just as one of the robots rolled silently up from the right, lowering its blaster barrel to aim directly at his head. Alan froze. "My God, Pete built those things wrong!"

Suddenly a screeching whirlwind of claws and teeth hurled itself from the smoldering branches and crashed against the robot, clawing insanely at the antenna and blaster barrel. With an awkward jerk the robot swung around and fired its blaster, completely dissolving the lower half of the cat creature which had clung across the barrel. But the back pressure of the cat's body overloaded the discharge circuits. The robot started to shake, then clicked sharply as an overload relay snapped and shorted the blaster cells. The killer turned and rolled back towards the camp, leaving Alan alone.

Shakily, Alan crawled a few feet back into the undergrowth where he could lie and watch the camp, but not himself be seen. Though visibility didn't make any difference to the robots, he felt safer, somehow, hidden. He knew now what the shooting sounds had been and why there hadn't been anyone around the camp site. A charred blob lying in the grass of the clearing confirmed his hypothesis. His stomach felt sick.

"I suppose," he muttered to himself, "that Pete assembled these robots in a batch and then activated them all at once, probably never living to realize that they're tuned to pick up human brain waves, too. Damn! Damn!" His eyes blurred and he slammed his fist into the soft earth.

When he raised his eyes again the jungle was perceptibly darker. Stealthy rustlings in the

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shadows grew louder with the setting sun. Branches snapped unaccountably in the trees overhead and every now and then leaves or a twig fell softly to the ground, close to where he lay. Reaching into his jacket, Alan fingered his pocket blaster. He pulled it out and held it in his right hand. "This pop gun wouldn't even singe a robot, but it just might stop one of those pumas."

Slowly Alan looked around, sizing up his situation. Behind him the dark jungle rustled forbiddingly. He shuddered. "Not a very healthy spot to spend the night. On the other hand, I certainly can't get to the camp with a pack of mind-activated mechanical killers running around. If I can just hold out until morning, when the big ship arrives . . . The big ship! Good Lord, Peggy!" He turned white; oily sweat punctuated his forehead. Peggy, arriving tomorrow with the other colonists, the wives and kids! The metal killers, tuned to blast any living flesh, would murder them the instant they stepped from the ship!

A pretty girl, Peggy, the girl he'd married just three weeks ago. He still couldn't believe it. It was crazy, he supposed, to marry a girl and then take off for an unknown planet, with her to follow, to try to create a home in a jungle clearing. Crazy maybe, but Peggy and her green eyes that changed color with the light, with her soft brown hair, and her happy smile, had ended thirty years of loneliness and had, at last, given him a reason for living. "Not to be killed!" Alan unclenched his fists and wiped his palms, bloody where his fingernails had dug into the flesh.

There was a slight creak above him like the protesting of a branch too heavily laden. Blaster ready, Alan rolled over onto his back. In the movement, his elbow struck the top of a small earthy mound and he was instantly engulfed in a swarm of locust-like insects that beat disgustingly against his eyes and mouth. "Fagh!" Waving his arms before his face he jumped up and backwards, away from the bugs. As he did so, a dark shapeless thing plopped from the trees onto the spot where he had been lying stretched out. Then, like an ambient fungus, it slithered off into the jungle undergrowth.

For a split second the jungle stood frozen in a brilliant blue flash, followed by the sharp report of a blaster. Then another. Alan whirled, startled. The planet's double moon had risen and he could see a robot rolling slowly across the clearing in his general direction, blasting indiscriminately at whatever mind impulses came within its pickup range, birds, insects, anything. Six or seven others also left the camp headquarters area and headed for the jungle, each to a slightly different spot.

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Apparently the robot hadn't sensed him yet, but Alan didn't know what the effective range of its pickup devices was. He began to slide back into the jungle. Minutes later, looking back he saw that the machine, though several hundred yards away, had altered its course and was now headed directly for him.

His stomach tightened. Panic. The dank, musty smell of the jungle seemed for an instant to thicken and choke in his throat. Then he thought of the big ship landing in the morning, settling down slowly after a lonely two-week voyage. He thought of a brown-haired girl crowding with the others to the gangway, eager to embrace the new planet, and the next instant a charred nothing, unrecognizable, the victim of a design error or a misplaced wire in a machine. "I have to try," he said aloud. "I have to try." He moved into the blackness.

Powerful as a small tank, the killer robot was equipped to crush, slash, and burn its way through undergrowth. Nevertheless, it was slowed by the larger trees and the thick, clinging vines, and Alan found that he could manage to keep ahead of it, barely out of blaster range. Only, the robot didn't get tired. Alan did.

The twin moons cast pale, deceptive shadows that wavered and danced across the jungle floor, hiding debris that tripped him and often sent him sprawling into the dark. Sharp-edged growths tore at his face and clothes, and insects attracted by the blood matted against his pants and shirt. Behind, the robot crashed imperturbably after him, lighting the night with fitful blaster flashes as some winged or legged life came within its range.

There was movement also, in the darkness beside him, scrapings and rustlings and an occasional low, throaty sound like an angry cat. Alan's fingers tensed on his pocket blaster. Swift shadowy forms moved quickly in the shrubs and the growling became suddenly louder. He fired twice, blindly, into the undergrowth. Sharp screams punctuated the electric blue discharge as a pack of small feline creatures leaped snarling and clawing back into the night.

Mentally, Alan tried to figure the charge remaining in his blaster. There wouldn't be much. "Enough for a few more shots, maybe. Why the devil didn't I load in fresh cells this morning!"

The robot crashed on, louder now, gaining on the tired human. Legs aching and bruised, stinging from insect bites, Alan tried to force himself to run holding his hands in front of him like a child in the dark. His foot tripped on a barely visible insect hill and a winged swarm exploded around him. Startled, Alan jerked sideways, crashing his head against a tree. He

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clutched at the bark for a second, dazed, then his knees buckled. His blaster fell into the shadows.

The robot crashed loudly behind him now. Without stopping to think, Alan fumbled along the ground after his gun, straining his eyes in the darkness. He found it just a couple of feet to one side, against the base of a small bush. Just as his fingers closed upon the barrel his other hand slipped into something sticky that splashed over his forearm. He screamed in pain and leaped back, trying frantically to wipe the clinging, burning blackness off his arm. Patches of black scraped off onto branches and vines, but the rest spread slowly over his arm as agonizing as hot acid, or as flesh being ripped away layer by layer.

Almost blinded by pain, whimpering, Alan stumbled forward. Sharp muscle spasms shot from his shoulder across his back and chest. Tears streamed across his cheeks.

A blue arc slashed at the trees a mere hundred yards behind. He screamed at the blast. "Damn you, Pete! Damn your robots! Damn, damn . . . Oh, Peggy!" He stepped into emptiness.

Coolness. Wet. Slowly, washed by the water, the pain began to fall away. He wanted to lie there forever in the dark, cool, wetness. For ever, and ever, and . . . The air thundered.

In the dim light he could see the banks of the stream, higher than a man, muddy and loose. Growing right to the edge of the banks, the jungle reached out with hairy, disjointed arms as if to snag even the dirty little stream that passed so timidly through its domain.

Alan, lying in the mud of the stream bed, felt the earth shake as the heavy little robot rolled slowly and inexorably towards him. "The Lord High Executioner," he thought, "in battle dress." He tried to stand but his legs were almost too weak and his arm felt numb. "I'll drown him," he said aloud. "I'll drown the Lord High Executioner." He laughed. Then his mind cleared. He remembered where he was.

Alan trembled. For the first time in his life he understood what it was to live, because for the first time he realized that he would sometime die. In other times and circumstances he might put it off for a while, for months or years, but eventually, as now, he would have to watch, still and helpless, while death came creeping. Then, at thirty, Alan became a man.

"Dammit, no law says I have to flame-out *now!*" He forced himself to rise, forced his legs to stand, struggling painfully in the shin-deep ooze. He worked his way to the bank and began to dig frenziedly, chest high, about two feet below the edge.

His arm where the black thing had been was swollen and tender, but he forced his hands to dig, dig, dig, cursing and crying to

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hide the pain, and biting his lips, ignoring the salty taste of blood. The soft earth crumbled under his hands until he had a small cave about three feet deep in the bank. Beyond that the soil was held too tightly by the roots from above and he had to stop.

The air crackled blue and a tree crashed heavily past Alan into the stream. Above him on the bank, silhouetting against the moons, the killer robot stopped and its blaster swivelled slowly down. Frantically, Alan hugged the bank as a shaft of pure electricity arced over him, sliced into the water, and exploded in a cloud of steam. The robot shook for a second, its blaster muzzle lifted erratically and for an instant it seemed almost out of control, then it quieted and the muzzle again pointed down.

Pressing with all his might, Alan slid slowly along the bank inches at a time, away from the machine above. Its muzzle turned to follow him but the edge of the bank blocked its aim. Grinding forward a couple of feet, slightly overhanging the bank, the robot fired again. For a split second Alan seemed engulfed in flame; the heat of hell singed his head and back, and mud boiled in the bank by his arm.

Again the robot trembled. It jerked forward a foot and its blaster swung slightly away. But only for a moment. Then the gun swung back again.

Suddenly, as if sensing something wrong, its tracks slammed into reverse. It stood poised for a second, its treads spinning crazily as the earth collapsed underneath it, where Alan had dug, then it fell with a heavy splash into the mud, ten feet from where Alan stood.

Without hesitation Alan threw himself across the blaster housing, frantically locking his arms around the barrel as the robot's treads churned furiously in the sticky mud, causing it to buck and plunge like a Brahma bull. The treads stopped and the blaster jerked upwards wrenching Alan's arms, then slammed down. Then the whole housing whirled around and around, tilting alternately up and down like a steel-skinned water monster trying to dislodge a tenacious crab, while Alan, arms and legs wrapped tightly around the blaster barrel and housing, pressed fiercely against the robot's metal skin.

Slowly, trying to anticipate and shift his weight with the spinning plunges, Alan worked his hand down to his right hip. He fumbled for the sheath clipped to his belt, found it, and extracted a stubby hunting knife. Sweat and blood in his eyes, hardly able to move on the wildly swinging turret, he felt down the sides to the thin crack between the revolving housing and the stationary portion of the robot. With a quick prayer he jammed in the knife blade—and was whipped headlong into the

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mud as the turret literally snapped to a stop.

The earth, jungle and moons spun in a pinwheeled blurr, slowed, and settled to their proper places. Standing in the sticky, sweet smelling ooze, Alan eyed the robot apprehensively. Half buried in mud, it stood quiet in the shadowy light except for an occasional, almost spasmodic jerk of its blaster barrel. For the first time that night Alan allowed himself a slight smile. "A blade in the old gear box, eh? How does that feel, boy?"

He turned. "Well, I'd better get out of here before the knife slips or the monster cooks up some more tricks with whatever it's got for a brain." Digging little footholds in the soft bank, he climbed up and stood once again in the rustling jungle darkness.

"I wonder," he thought, "how Pete could cram enough brain into one of those things to make it hunt and track so perfectly." He tried to visualize the computing circuits needed for the operation of its tracking mechanism alone. "There just isn't room for the electronics. You'd need a computer as big as the one at camp headquarters."

In the distance the sky blazed as a blaster roared in the jungle. Then Alan heard the approaching robot, crunching and snapping its way through the undergrowth like an onrushing forest fire. He froze. "Good Lord! They communicate with each other! The one I jammed must be calling others to help."

He began to move along the bank, away from the crashing sounds. Suddenly he stopped, his eyes widened. "Of course! Radio! I'll bet anything they're automatically controlled by the camp computer. That's where their brain is!" He paused. "Then, if that were put out of commission . . ." He jerked away from the bank and half ran, half pulled himself through the undergrowth towards the camp.

Trees exploded to his left as another robot fired in his direction, too far away to be effective but churning towards him through the blackness.

Alan changed direction slightly to follow a line between the two robots coming up from either side, behind him. His eyes were well accustomed to the dark now, and he managed to dodge most of the shadowy vines and branches before they could snag or trip him. Even so, he stumbled in the wiry underbrush and his legs were a mass of stinging slashes from ankle to thigh.

The crashing rumble of the killer robots shook the night behind him, nearer sometimes, then falling slightly back, but following constantly, more unshakable than bloodhounds because a man can sometimes cover a scent, but no man can stop his thoughts. Intermittently, like photographers' strobes, blue flashes would light the jungle about him. Then, for seconds afterwards his eyes would see

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dancing streaks of yellow and sharp multi-colored pinwheels that alternately shrunk and expanded as if in a surrealist's nightmare. Alan would have to pause and squeeze his eyelids tight shut before he could see again, and the robots would move a little closer.

To his right the trees silhouetted briefly against brilliance as a third robot slowly moved up in the distance. Without thinking, Alan turned slightly to the left, then froze in momentary panic. "I should be at the camp now. Damn, what direction am I going?" He tried to think back, to visualize the twists and turns he'd taken in the jungle. "All I need is to get lost."

He pictured the camp computer with no one to stop it, automatically sending its robots in wider and wider forays, slowly wiping every trace of life from the planet. Technologically advanced machines doing the job for which they were built, completely, thoroughly, without feeling, and without human masters to separate sense from futility. Finally parts would wear out, circuits would short, and one by one the killers would crunch to a halt. A few birds would still fly then, but a unique animal life, rare in the universe, would exist no more. And the bones of children, eager girls, and their men would also lie, beside a rusty hulk, beneath the alien sun.

"Peggy!"

As if in answer, a tree beside him breathed fire, then exploded. In the brief flash of the blaster shot, Alan saw the steel glint of a robot only a hundred yards away, much nearer than he had thought. "Thank heaven for trees!" He stepped back, felt his foot catch in something, clutched futilely at some leaves and fell heavily.

Pain danced up his leg as he grabbed his ankle. Quickly he felt the throbbing flesh. "Damn the rotten luck, anyway!" He blinked the pain tears from his eyes and looked up—into a robot's blaster, jutting out of the foliage, thirty yards away.

Instinctively, in one motion Alan grabbed his pocket blaster and fired. To his amazement the robot jerked back, its gun wobbled and started to tilt away. Then, getting itself under control, it swung back again to face Alan. He fired again, and again the robot reacted. It seemed familiar somehow. Then he remembered the robot on the river bank, jiggling and swaying for seconds after each shot. "Of course!" He cursed himself for missing the obvious. "The blaster static blanks out radio transmission from the computer for a few seconds. They even do it to themselves!"

Firing intermittently, he pulled himself upright and hobbled ahead through the bush. The robot shook spasmodically with each shot, its gun tilted upward at an awkward angle.

Then, unexpectedly, Alan saw

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stars, real stars brilliant in the night sky, and half dragging his swelling leg he stumbled out of the jungle into the camp clearing. Ahead, across fifty yards of grass stood the headquarters building, housing the robot controlling computer. Still firing at short intervals he started across the clearing, gritting his teeth at every step.

Straining every muscle in spite of the agonizing pain, Alan forced himself to a limping run across the uneven ground, carefully avoiding the insect hills that jutted up through the grass. From the corner of his eye he saw another of the robots standing shakily in the dark edge of the jungle waiting, it seemed, for his small blaster to run dry.

"Be damned! You can't win now!" Alan yelled between blaster shots, almost irrational from the pain that ripped jaggedly through his leg. Then it happened. A few feet from the building's door his blaster quit. A click. A faint hiss when he frantically jerked the trigger again and again, and the spent cells released themselves from the device, falling in the grass at his feet. He dropped the useless gun.

"No!" He threw himself on the ground as a new robot suddenly appeared around the edge of the building a few feet away, aimed, and fired. Air burned over Alan's back and ozone tingled in his nostrils.

Blinding itself for a few seconds with its own blaster static, the robot paused momentarily, jiggling in place. In this instant, Alan jammed his hands into an insect hill and hurled the pile of dirt and insects directly at the robot's antenna. In a flash, hundreds of the winged things erupted angrily from the hole in a swarming cloud, each part of which was a speck of life transmitting mental energy to the robot's pickup devices.

Confused by the sudden dispersion of mind impulses, the robot fired erratically as Alan crouched and raced painfully for the door. It fired again, closer, as he fumbled with the lock release. Jagged bits of plastic and stone ripped past him, torn loose by the blast.

Frantically, Alan slammed open the door as the robot, sensing him strongly now, aimed point blank. He saw nothing, his mind thought of nothing but the red-clad safety switch mounted beside the computer. Time stopped. There was nothing else in the world. He half-jumped, half-fell towards it, slowly, in tenths of seconds that seemed measured out in years.

The universe went black.

Later. Brilliance pressed upon his eyes. Then pain returned, a multi-hurting thing that crawled through his body and dragged ragged tentacles across his brain. He moaned.

A voice spoke hollowly in the distance. "He's waking. Call his wife."

Alan opened his eyes in a

(Continued on page 121

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The *DEADLY* Daughters

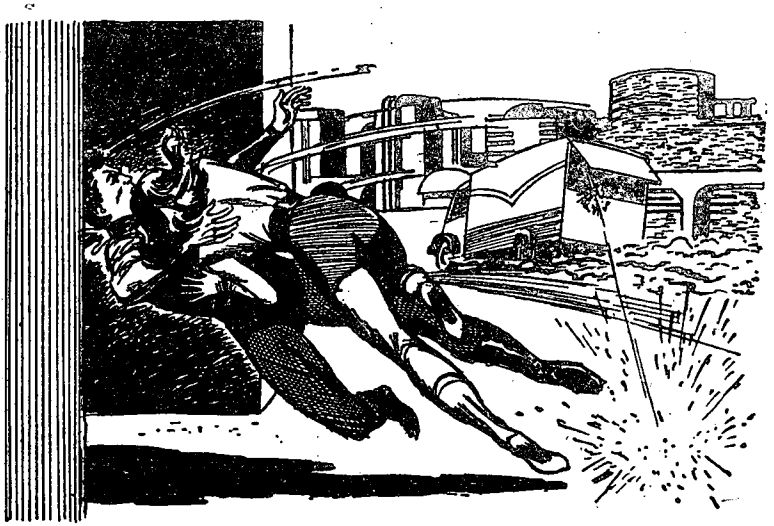
By WINSTON K. MARKS

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

These gorgeous fanatics were equally at home with men, murder, or matrimony, and they used all three with amazing success.

DR. HUBERT LONG, 40, bachelor and assistant professor of political science at Mentioch University, thrust his rugged, unlovely face forward, sticking out his neck literally and figuratively.

"The Humanist Party," he shouted at the 800 odd students in the lecture hall, "is not a po-



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litical party at all. It's an oligarchy, so firmly established in Washington that our electoral form of government is an empty ritual, a ridiculous myth. Our elections are rigged to perpetuate a select group of feminists in absolute power."

The mixed group of seniors stirred in their seats with wide eyes, and many began taking notes.

"This may cost me my position at the university," he said grimly, "but the time has come for all responsible citizens to face the fact that the Government of the United States of America has degenerated into little better than an absolute dictatorship!"

This time a rustle of whispering grew to restless buzzing. A young man in a bowtie leaped to his feet breaking the no-questions rule in Long's over-size classes. "May the *Mentioch Bugle* quote you, Dr. Long?"

"You may headline those views, and I hope you do," Long declared belligerently, adding extra emphasis.

"Exactly what do you imply when you call the Humanist Party a group of feminists?" the young man asked, encouraged.

Long's gaze swept out, noting the mild amusement on the faces of the men students, the growing annoyance in the women. He fixed the reporter for the campus paper with a level stare. "I suppose you feel that because only 30 percent of our legislatures are women, that men still dominate Congress?"

"I think that is the popular conception," the reporter said in a patronizing tone.

"Then think again, young man. Analyze the composition of the Senate and House, and break down the key committee appointments by sexes. You will find three-fourths of these posts held by women, and the balance are held by men whose wives are members of the top-level Humanist Party movement. I say to you that our whole nation is dominated by a handful of female fanatics to whom intellectual integrity is unknown."

"What are your indictments? Please enumerate—"

"I will, I will," Long shouted, ignoring the microphone before him. "Without consideration of our national prestige the Humanist Party has emasculated our influence as a world power with its pacifistic actions. On the domestic front, the Party has initiated a program of so-called Internal Security, a cradle-to-the-grave pampering that amounts to the most vicious State-Socialism the world has seen since the fall of Soviet Russia. We are fast becoming slaves to the soft, gutless bureaucracy in Washington that feeds us, wipes our noses, encourages excessive breeding and enforces its fantastic policies by use of goon squads!"

"Goon squads?" The young reporter lost his smile. "You had better clarify that, Dr.

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Long. I wouldn't want to join you in a libel action."

"Keep quoting me," Long snarled. "I said goon squads, and I meant just that. Once I belonged to a scholarly fraternity of political scientists who were critical of our government. Of some eighteen members, I am the only one left in public life. The rest have all disappeared, and I have no doubt that my previous silence on these matters is all that has saved me. But the time for discretion is past. If we are to save our independence and democratic freedoms the time for action is now! I say to you—"

It made more than the headlines of the college campus at Mentioch. The news-wire services picked it up, and Dr. Long's radical views made pages two and three all over the nation.

Emily Bogarth, head of Internal Security, raged at her assistant, bald-headed Terman Donlup. "Must I read about these things in the papers to keep up on subversive activity?"

"But the man's record shows complete stability," Donlup defended. "He simply blew up without any warning at all. The Dean of Women at Mentioch, tells me that Dr. Long has never had a word of criticism from his department head. I suppose we had better remove him from his position at once, eh?"

Madame Secretary Bogarth shook her head. "That's not enough. This calls for liquidation. I want a special squad on this one." She began writing names on a sheet of paper, names of some of the most effective unscrupulous yet faithful operators in the party's top echelon.

She handed it to Donlup. "This man is dangerous. He could force us into open control of the press and higher education. Get these people here not later than tomorrow. We can't waste time."

"Yes, Madame Secretary," Donlup saluted with a full bow and went to work.

The following afternoon Emily Bogarth faced the squad with its brilliant, green-eyed leader. She told them their mission and then dismissed all but one. "I'm sorry to hand this one to you. I know what a promising career you had before you. But this man is deadly to our purpose. Believe me, I am not wasting your special aptitudes."

"If it's for the good of the Party—"

"Dr. Hubert Long is a lighted fuse," Emily Bogarth said, her cold eyes hard on her operator, "that could blow the Humanist movement sky-high. I want you to snuff out that fuse." She squeezed a forefinger against her spatulate thumb.

The operator nodded and the green eyes flashed with the same fanatic spark that electrified American politics at the turn of the 21st century and launched the Humanist Party

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into its 30-year tenure of power.

At first only a shocked, embarrassed silence greeted Dr. Long on the campus of Mentioch University, but as the press notices of his utterances grew in volume so did his prestige.

He began to have a number of local visitors who evinced sharp interest in his views. At the end of the first week he was holding forth each evening to a sizable audience in his tiny bungalow on the edge of faculty row.

By nature a careful, practical man, Hubert Long now carried a small pistol in his coat pocket, but being also a fearless, independent individual, he admitted all callers and exposed himself daily to the public. It wasn't entirely personal bravado, however. He knew from his years of intense, discreet research that the goon squads rarely made their attacks in the public eye. When they liquidated him he fervently hoped they would make this mistake and prove his point concerning their operations.

Although he didn't seek martyrdom, Dr. Long was prepared for it, as he explained to the informal seminar that had accumulated at his home this Sunday afternoon. It was now late evening and the endless questions were beginning to grow wearying.

"How do you know," asked a skeptical businessman, "that I am not an assassin who will ambush you on the way to the bathroom tonight?"

There were several ladies present, and bachelor Long blushed with annoyance. "You might very well be," he retorted. "But probably I have some measure of temporary protection from the publicity I have received. My death, if it occurs, will doubtless appear to be from natural causes, or perhaps from a most ordinary but unfortunate accident."

He arose. "It's rather late and I have an early class. Will you excuse me? Thanks for coming, everyone of you." He nodded, trying to smile, but the chill thought from the businessman's remark persisted. Very possible it was that one or more members of a goon squad was among the twenty-some people now beginning to pick themselves off his worn carpet, footstool, coffee table and the meager furniture he could afford on his salary.

With a small start he realized that a youngish woman, in her early thirties, he guessed, was stalling as though she intended to remain behind. Sure enough, she closed the door behind the others and turned a very lovely face to him. "I think you are magnificent, Dr. Long," she said impulsively. "I hope you will spare me just a few minutes alone?"

Long slipped his right hand into his coat pocket casually. On her feet the woman displayed more than a beautiful face. Her figure was alarmingly feminine

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and rather aggressively displayed, feet akimbo, hips forward, shoulders back. Her hair was nearly platinum, but so expensively dressed it was impossible to determine whether it was artificially so.

She caught his hesitation. "Perhaps you would feel better out on the porch," she offered, smiling with such relaxed understanding that Long felt a little boorish.

"No. Sit down, please. I didn't catch your name earlier."

"Julie Stone," she introduced herself and held out a long, bare arm. Her hand squeezed his fingers warmly, more like a man's grip. "My brother is Senator Stone, and he asked me to stop by and meet you. Secretly he agrees with much of what you have said, but of course he is reluctant to expose himself until something of a formal movement is under way."

Long relaxed a little. This was good news, about the first he had had to date. Political figures were remaining eloquently silent in the press, and this was the first overture he had enjoyed from anyone more influential than the reporters.

She went on, "Specifically, my brother would like to know which of the other two political parties you favor, in the event you make an appeal through such channels."

"Either party," Long asserted with some emphasis. "In fact I would like to see a coalition of the Democratic and Republican Parties to overthrow this unholy Humanist gang."

Her forehead wrinkled. "Precisely Tom's idea. He's not at all certain it can be done, but he thinks that the press reaction you have had indicates there is a possibility if it is played right."

"Yes, the so-called free press," he said. "Some people have thrown that up to me. If the Humanists were dictators, they say, we wouldn't have this free press that has given my remarks currency. I read it differently. The Humanists have sold the press a bill of goods, and so they control the papers in the most effective way of all. You'll notice that they have printed my speeches strictly as news, you might say as oddities in the news. Editorial comment has been extremely noncommittal."

"I hope you are right," Long said. He made a pot of coffee, and they discussed the matter at some length. He liked this woman's direct, open approach, but she startled him as she was leaving.

"I have much to tell my brother," she said. "For my own curiosity, though, are you certain that some personal distrust or dislike for women hasn't influenced your attack against the government?"

It jarred him like an uppercut. Her detached manner had almost made him forget she was a woman herself. Now this.

"Why—why do you ask?"

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She shrugged. "It was a natural thought. There aren't many confirmed bachelors these days."

"Oh, that!" He smiled. "You're quite right, there aren't many unattached men over twenty-one any more, what with the barrage of government propaganda and their special tax deduction incentives. I assure you that it's nothing personal, however. My tastes are simply too rich."

"Your tastes?" It was her turn to arch an eyebrow.

"That's right. A lovely woman is a work of art, but like any other masterpiece, she is a luxury I can't afford. Anyway, this mugg of mine rather put me out of the running in the only leagues I've wanted to play in. Incidentally, you introduced yourself as *Miss* Julie Stone, didn't you?"

"No, but it happens to be correct."

"What's your excuse?"

"For being single? I'm a career girl. I have my own modeling agency. Too busy for one thing. And I guess a woman gets bored looking at beautiful men in my business. Not a brain in a barnfull. Just beautiful brawn and wavy hair. Ugh! Animals! Everyone of them."

"Young woman, that's sedition. Don't you believe the government propaganda?"

"If I did do you think I'd be here? No. Dr. Long, I find your arguments quite valid. America is in the hands of the feminists, all right, and it's the fault of several generations of mama's boys. I just can't get—"

She broke off as a heavy truck rolled by out front, back-firing heavily. They were both silhouetted in the open door. She glanced out, and suddenly she threw herself upon him, pulling him to the floor. He caught her in his arms as they cascaded into a tangle of limbs and nylon.

The racket faded off down the street, but Dr. Long's mind was not on the noise. The touch of this beautiful woman's flesh under his hands dominated his whole being. How different, how soft, incredibly soft!

Now she was clinging to him, trembling slightly and breathing deeply. Even at this range her pale hair looked natural. "Are you all right?" she asked at last.

"Of course," he said sitting up reluctantly. "It was only a truck back-firing."

"Look!" She pointed behind behind him at the wall opposite the door. A wavery line of small, deep holes cut across about heart-high. "I saw the gun-barrel stick out as the truck came up," she explained, untangling herself. "It appears your temporary immunity is over. They're getting active."

Long stared half-unbelieving at the mean, business-like little holes. With the reactions of a trained semanticist he relaxed instead of tensing up with fear. He had made his decision days ago, and he knew full well the risks he incurred.

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"Thanks for nothing!" he said coldly.

Julie Stone looked up from straightening her dress and studied his lined face. "So you really were expecting an attack?" She shook her head in disgust. "I finally meet a man with some semblance of guts, and the only way he can think of to win his point is to let a goon squad spill them in the headlines!"

She threw herself into an armchair and crossed her knees. Long stood in the middle of the floor staring down at the woman he had held in his arms minutes ago, and his temples began throbbing. "What—what else is there to do?" he asked hoarsely. "This was my best chance to draw attention to the reality of our police state. I have much more to die for than to live for. This has been my life's work—gathering the facts and contriving to present them dramatically enough to attract national attention. My only fear was that they wouldn't come after me, and I might be written off as a crackpot."

"I regret," she intoned, "that I have but one life to give to my country!" Then her lip curled. "Very well, brainy, if that's the best you can think up. Let's make it better yet. How about this for a headline: *Dr. Long and Lovely Model Murdered by Federal Hoods!*"

"Are you insane?"

She shook her head. "I'm dead serious. I'm sticking right in the line of fire until you figure out a way to stay alive at a profit."

He argued, pleaded and even lost his temper, pulling her to her feet and trying to force her out the door. He didn't make it. Somehow his arms slipped too far around her, and she clamped herself to him in a defiant embrace. The soft warmth of her body, her sweet breath in his nostrils, the faint essence of her perfume enveloped him in a befuddling weakness.

Live at a profit? How could a man want to die with Julie Stone in his arms?

He knew it was supremely idiotic, but the thought of her fabulous form crumpled and riddled with bullets slashed at the tendons of his resolve, and he clutched her lips to his with the hunger of the condemned man he was.

"Julie, Julie! Why did you have to—"

"One bullet, a single bullet will do it now." Her lips peeled back from her white teeth. "Let's stay this way, darling. That's the way you want it."

Her low, black sedan nibbled at the 100-mile-per-hour limit on the Freeway as they crossed the state line. In the back seat, reclining out of sight, his head pillowed on his brief case full of his documented case against the Humanist Party, was a very thoughtful Dr. Hubert Long, recently of Mentioch University.

He had driven until dawn while Julie Stone slept, and now, after a brief nap, he was

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waking to some of the realities of the morning.

This flight was utterly absurd. When the federal people discovered he was not dead they would come after him again and again. All he had done was involve this lovely woman. Long since he had controlled fear for his own life, but now he knew the exquisite torment of fearing for the woman he loved.

The emotion was genuine and no less raging for its swift eruption in the space of a single evening. Dr. Hubert Long was hopelessly and deeply in love with Julie Stone.

"Quit worrying," she called back to him. "They couldn't have spotted my car. I parked it a block from your house, remember?"

"I hope you have a plan," Long muttered. "I certainly don't. Where are we heading?"

"Florida. To my brother's winter place. You know, I just had a thought. Tom and I are both on the board of regents of Toppinhout College down there, and there'll be an opening next quarter in the faculty. A professorship, in fact."

Long grunted. "No dice. They'll have every political scientist in the country under scrutiny for years."

"This is the chair of anthropology," she said. "We can change your name, and after this first excitement of your disappearance dies down—"

"But I don't want it to die down!" he objected.

"I thought we settled that. You've got to stay alive to talk to important people. Tom and I will round them up secretly, and you can present your case to them. My brother is the senior Senator, you know, and he's been itching to bolt the Humanist Party for the last two terms."

"What can I accomplish in secret conferences? The people are the ones who must be aroused."

"I know, I know, from a soapbox in Times Square, I suppose. Darling, you can't accomplish this alone. They've proved they are willing to take the chance of killing you, so they must be stronger than you think. Your facts must come to the attention of the right people. Over a period of time we can organize a truly effective underground."

"Toppinhout is a girls' college."

"So?"

"I've never taught anthropology before."

"You've never been married before, either," she pointed out, "but I predict you'll be a success at both."

"Married?" Long popped his head up.

She smiled at him in the rearview mirror. "Get your head down before you get it blown off. Yes, I said married. I'm not trusting that pug-ugly, beautiful mugg of yours out of my sight from now on. And I'm afraid Tom will shoot you himself if you don't make it conventional. Tom's old-fashioned."

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"But—I couldn't support you on—"

"A full professor's salary? Don't be foolish. Besides, I'm retiring from my agency. Selling out. That'll set us up housekeeping."

That such a prosaic term as "set us up housekeeping" should send molten lava racing through his veins, did not seem strange to Dr. Hubert Long. How could a man successfully keep his mind on dying when at last a work of art like Julie seemed within his reach? He knew that his plans were irrevocably changed.

Emily Bogarth turned to the phone speaker as her assistant made the circuit and signalled to her.

"On the Hubert Long mission—" the speaker said. "Mission accomplished from this end. I trust you have a likely story for the press?"

"Never mind that. Did it come off as planned?"

"Precisely. Your marksmen were quite effective."

Emily Bogarth sighed. "Sorry to sacrifice you, honey, but the other way is just too messy."

"Don't mention it. This chap has a very interesting mind. He's a challenge—in more ways than one. By the way, get word to Senator Stone, will you? Have him fly down to his winter home at once. He'll be needed. Some Party members, too."

"Of course. That's all set up. Good luck!"

"Thanks, but you can put your mind at rest. Dr. Hubert Long is positively liquidated."

Julie stepped from the phone booth and paid the service attendant for the gasoline. He looked at her as he dropped the change into her hand and wondered who the lucky chap in the back seat might be. A man would sell his soul for the right kind of a look from those green eyes.

THE END

SURVIVAL TACTICS

(Continued from page 112

white room; a white light hung over his head. Beside him, looking down with a rueful smile, stood a young man wearing space medical insignia. "Yes," he acknowledged the question in Alan's eyes, "you hit the switch. That was three days ago. When you're up again we'd all like to thank you."

Suddenly a sobbing-laughing green-eyed girl was pressed tightly against him. Neither of them spoke. They couldn't. There was too much to say.

THE END

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Call Us Prospectors

By IRV FANG

Sometimes when you start a simple little rumor you never know when you'll hear the end of it . . .

OF ALL the dull jobs in the world of space travel, Colin and I probably had the dullest.

You would think that with all the explorer rockets whirring through ether where no man had ever traveled and with all the sumptuous spaceliners ferrying passengers I could latch onto some better job than carrying supplies to whistle-stop planets in the dog star's orbit.

Colin is a good pilot, too, inclined to grumble a little but then who wouldn't with a run like ours. He got caught by the solar police carrying black market whiskey to Jupiter and lost his first class license. As for me, that's another story. I became a bit too entangled with a luscious blonde who turned out to be the daughter of some big-wig on Earth. The old man found out about it, and came after me with an electron gun, so I hightailed it out of the constellation and took this job with a beat-up cargo line stopping off at pioneer settlements on some of the thousands of planets that make up the dog star system.

We talked a lot, Colin and me, about getting a lucky break some day to escape this rut, but we didn't expect anything to come of it until we discovered that the planet Shir was almost solid uranium.

At least there was an awful lot of it there according to the geiger counter. How come the fifty-seven families that settled on Shir didn't know about it is a mystery we'll never figure out. They were only there for farming, so maybe they didn't even bother with Geiger counters, until our cargo trip.

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Anyhow, we had just reached Shir's gravity field and were turning on the power to slow down when Colin asked what that noise was.

"What noise?" I asked back. When you turn the power on before a landing there is so much noise all round I didn't know which particular one he was referring to.

"That click, click, clicking," he said.

Colin and I have both sworn off the habit of cutting rocket fuel with pineapple juice so I figured he wasn't just hearing things. I listened. Sure enough, above the pocketa kapocketa there was a click, clickety, click.

"It sounds like it's coming from the cargo hold," I said.

"Number Two rocket is just below the front cargo hold," Colin said.

"Just what I was thinking," I replied. "Let's pull her back out of the gravity field for a check." I wasn't going to take any chances on ending up like a cigar ash on some dinky planet just to try and deliver some plant fertilizer.

Colin switched on the anti-gravity lever and I swung the nose around. Ten minutes later we were once again floating in the ether.

"That's funny," Colin said. "I can't hear it now."

We activated the magnets in our shoes and went clomping back along the metal sidewalls of the ship to the cargo hold.

"Still can't hear a thing," Colin said, pressing his ear to the plate above Number Two rocket.

I was standing higher than he was and I heard something, very faint, going, "click, click, click." I wandered back among the polythene crates with my ears stuck out until I came to one from which the noise apparently came. I called Colin over.

"It's in here," I said.

Colin came over to listen. "Shall we?" he asked.

"It's against the rules," I reminded him.

"To heck with the rules. It could be a bomb. I repeat, shall we?"

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's crack it open."

He produced a knife and slit the case open to expose a miscellaneous collection of compasses, pickaxes, a carton marked "DANGER; Blasting Caps" and a textbook on minerology.

"Looks like someone wants to go into the prospecting business," I said.

Colin reached into the case and pulled out a box marked, "Geiger Counter." "This is doing the tapping," he said beaming with success.

Sure enough the little black box was clicking merrily away and the pointer was wavering on the dial. It was a persistent clicking but it wasn't very loud, not surprising since we were a hundred miles from nowhere, nowhere meaning Shir.

"Well it must have been

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louder than this when we were closer to Shir," I said.

Colin's mind and mine must have gotten the same idea at the same time. We clomp, clomped back to the controls with unseemly haste, taking the Geiger counter, and headed back toward Shir.

The nearer we came the louder that black box clicked until, when we were just a few miles over land it sounded like everyone in the universe was clearing his throat at the same time.

"This planet," I said, "must be solid uranium or plutonium or something."

"We are about to become rich," Colin said. "Rich, rich, rich."

I folded my hands behind my head, leaned back and thought of the joys of a villa on the Venus Lido populated by beautiful gray-eyed Venusian serving girls. Then a more crass note interjected itself.

"Colin, old man, we own nary a patch of this floating atomic pile below. The whole planet belongs to a handful of farmers to whom we must deliver not only fertilizer but this Geiger counter."

"Let's cruise for a minute and think," he said.

I cut the rockets to idle and turned on the robot. We hung over Shir.

"Let's approach this logically," Colin said. "We have several facts before us. Fact number one is that people who own uranium land are well rewarded."

"Check."

"Fact number two is that the whole planet below seems to contain uranium."

"Check."

"Fact number three is that the settlers don't know fact number two, otherwise it would have been in the telenews and would have been declared a Security area."

"Check."

"It would have been especially off-limits to gents like us. Of that you can be sure."

"An unpleasant fact, but check."

"Fact number four is that we are therefore the only people in the world who know about this fortune."

"Check."

"The conclusion is that if we manage to secure the uranium land and don't deliver the Geiger counter, we may happily look forward to a carefree future."

"How are we going to hide something that sounds like a New Year's Eve noisemaker?" I asked.

"Simple," Colin said. "We'll just take it apart."

"Okay," I agreed. "Now with what are we going to purchase a plot of land. We are flatter than Pluto's moon."

Colin put his feet on the dash panel and smiled a slow smile, exposing a gold-filled cavity.

"We are not going to buy a plot of land," he said. "We are

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going to buy this whole crater-pocked planet."

"What!"

"Look here," he said. "We have a perfectly good if rickety spaceship which will, with a little crowding, take fifty-seven families and their essential luggage back to Earth or Mars. We can buy them out for the price of their passage if we can convince them they had better leave in a hurry."

"How are we going to do that?" I asked.

"Leave it to me," Colin said. "Now let's land this heap."

With the Geiger counter in fifty small pieces in a paper bag tucked behind the dashboard and the rest of the gear in the carton stowed in other dark recesses we made a smooth landing on Shir's rocket port. The whole community was there to greet us. All of the yokels wanted to be in on the semi-annual visit, the only excitement there was. They were so far out they didn't even have television.

A sunburned, broad-shouldered type came forward to greet us as we stepped out.

"We are happy to see you," he said, crushing my fingers with a big horny hand. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Fine," I said, extricating my mangled hand.

"We'd like you to have supper and spend the night in my home before you return," he said. "My name is Camp."

Colin broke away from a group of men, women and kids crowding around him to shake hands.

"Are you the boss around here, Mr. Camp?" he asked.

"Well, in a way. I'm the community leader."

Colin didn't waste any time getting his scheme in motion.

"My co-pilot and I are very sorry that we have to bring bad news to your colony."

A murmur of surprise ran through the crowd. Camp frowned.

"What is the news?" he asked. I was curious myself.

"The Ministry of Fission has decided to use part of Shir as a dumping ground for waste atomic slag. They have been running out of dumping areas in the solar system and are going to use the planets in the dog star system," Colin said, managing to look very solemn.

"They can't do that," Camp said. "We've planted our fields here and built houses."

"That's not right," someone else said.

Colin spread his hands hopelessly. "Right or not, we can't question a decision of the Ministry of Fission. I guess they figured that since this was a new colony, you wouldn't have had time to get too settled. Anyhow, you aren't forced to leave. They would use the other side of the planet as a dump site."

Camp folded his big hands behind him. "No, we couldn't stay on the same planet with radioactive waste. In time it would

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kill our livestock and plants, and maybe even us."

"We have no orders to transport you back," Colin continued. "But we would be willing to sell you passage if you wanted to return."

"You come upon us with such unexpected news," Camp said, mopping his brow with the back of his brown hand. "I . . . I . . . don't know what to tell you. We need time to think. The elders will have to meet . . . it's all so sudden."

He turned to the others. "Come to my house at the time the third moon rises." Then he said to us, "Meanwhile, you will be guests in my home. There are some points I want to clarify."

That did it, I said to myself. He's suspicious. Colin's story sounded so good he even had me believing it, though I couldn't help wondering how he and I would fit in. Now I figured this Camp character had a bee in his space bonnet. I was wrong though.

We piled into his terra-scooter after he gave his men orders to unload the fertilizer. At first he wasn't sure whether it was worth bothering to unload, but Colin explained that if they decided to stay they would need the fertilizer and if they decided to go back they would need the room.

Camp's house was one of those backwoodsy little inflatable plastic jobs set in a clearing with a lot of other houses that were identical except for color. There was a small vegetable garden around each one.

Camp's wife was friendly enough, but kind of dowdy looking and she had a grip that was almost as strong as his. They had a couple of nice kids though, and Camp shooed them away to the store for some cake and ice cream.

He didn't talk much until after supper, which was sort of plain, but I could tell he was thinking hard. Colin looked over toward me once at the supper table and winked. It was all I could do not to giggle.

After supper we took some chairs and sat outside. I must say that Shir's air was about as clear and refreshing as any I've ever sniffed. They told me it was due to the high oxygen content. They also told me the land was poor for planting and there were a lot of rocks. Boy, if those poor saps knew the rocks were probably solid uranium!

Like I said, Camp wasn't the least bit suspicious about the truth of what we were telling him. These colonist farmer types are pretty simple specimens when you get right down to it. They don't try to put one over on the next fellow and figure it will be vice versa. Camp never ran into anyone like us before.

Colin and I lit up some cigars and Camp lit up a pipe and asked, "When was the decision made?"

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Colin answered, "I'm not exactly sure, Mr. Camp. Most likely sometime after the last spaceship left for Shir, because they instructed us to deliver the message."

"Was there any provision for compensating us for our work here if we should decide to leave?"

Colin fished in his pockets. "I had the instructions around here some place. I guess I must have left them back in the ship. I remember though. They agreed to pay you after you put in a claim with the Ministry of Colonies. There is some red tape involved, but I'm sure you won't have any trouble collecting."

Camp stared out over the land. "It seems such a shame after all our efforts here that we should be forced to leave. You know, the crops will be up in another month and we planned on having our first harvest festival."

I broke in. "Mr. Camp," I said, "you aren't being forced to leave. The choice is up to you."

Camp blew out some smoke. "No, we will have to leave," he said. "I'm sure the elders will accept that as the only choice they could make. But . . . but wasn't there some other place they could have chosen? The skies are full of uninhabitable moons."

Colin had a ready answer for that one. "The Ministry decided against using any more moons because the radiation would eventually seep back to the planets that have been colonized for a long time. After all, it is better to forfeit two years of work here than a couple of centuries elsewhere."

"Yes, I suppose you are right. But another question arises. How are we to pay our passage back? Did the Ministry arrange to guarantee our passage?"

Colin managed to look very glum. "I'm afraid not."

"That makes matters very difficult. Most of our funds have gone into equipment. We don't have enough cash for return trips for all of us."

Colin threw his pitch. "Mr. Camp, I know I'm not supposed to do this and my co-pilot and myself could lose our jobs if our employers ever found out, but we have a little money of our own we have saved up. I guess it would just about cover all your fares. Suppose we paid everyone's fare back in return for the plows and other equipment you have to leave behind."

"That's very generous of you," Camp said. "I'll take it up with the elders. But you will be losing if you do this. Our second-hand goods will only fetch a fraction of the total fare price."

"Well, you are good people and we have no objection at all to extending ourselves to help a little."

"None at all," I echoed.

"Oh, by the way," Colin said, "you had better sign over the planet charter to us. That is, if you decide to leave. It's just a

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little legal protection so we can come back for the supplies without anyone thinking we are stealing."

Camp nodded his head. "Yes, of course. We would have no more use for it . . . I cannot understand a government department doing this."

"It is unfortunate," my partner agreed. "But you know all the red tape and bungling that goes on in the government. One department never knows what another one is doing. If the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Colonies had been brought in on the decision, which I personally doubt, they might have kicked up a bit of a fuss. Of course the Ministry of Fission has more authority than the other two and I guess what's done is done." He spread his hands in gesture of hopelessness.

Camp looked toward the east and saw the third moon rising, slightly larger than the other two.

"The elders will meet soon," he said. "Would you like to remain?"

Colin rose and stretched. "No, I don't think so, thank you, Mr. Camp. We'll stroll through the fields for a while. It's a real shame that all this will soon be covered with radioactive dust."

A few men began arriving from out of the dusk and Colin and I took our leave and walked toward the fields. The ground was springy beneath our feet. Shir, being smaller than Earth, allowed us to leap about eight feet in the air if we tried hard. As soon as we were out of sight and hearing range I jumped, I'll bet, twice as high.

"Boy, oh, boy! We did it."

"Yes," he grinned. "I think it is in the bag."

That was where it was, we learned the next day. The colonists had agreed to leave, bag and a limited amount of baggage.

For about five days life was pretty hectic on Shir. There wasn't anything for Colin or me to do but stand around and watch everybody pack, except for the night I sneaked on the ship and got the Geiger counter pieces, then hid them in a clump of bushes where nobody was likely to stray. I thought about putting the thing together, but then remembered it would probably make so much noise that our little business enterprise would be found out, and I sure didn't want that.

The women colonists couldn't make up their minds what to take and what to leave. To tell the truth there was one blonde who could have left herself on the planet and I wouldn't have minded one bit. I was going to suggest it to her, but Colin said no, there was no use looking for trouble when everything was going so smoothly, and besides I'd been in enough hot water over blondes already, he said, reminding me of that big-wig's daughter episode that made me leave Earth in the first place.

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Some of the men didn't want to abandon the crops they had planted, but Camp and the rest of the elders talked to them. A couple of kids cried about wanting to stay where they were. A good spanking settled them and they soon got eager about the trip back, pestering me about how fast the ship would take off and what was the cruising speed in space, and things like that.

Just about the time we were ready to go the elders turned over the title to Shir to us. That settled that.

The trip back to Earth was pretty uneventful. I tried to make time with that blonde, but her husband was sitting next to her most of the time, and besides she didn't seem too interested. Camp kept talking about how he was going to complain to the central government about using a colonized planet as a dumping ground.

That was the reason Colin decided to land the ship at an out-of-the-way field in South America. He chose a backwash town in Uruguay. Everybody piled out and unloaded. When they saw where we were a couple of the elders complained to Colin. He told them something about fog closing in the big airports. They grumbled but there wasn't much they could do about it. We checked the rocket field schedule and learned there would be a ship by in a couple of days. That was enough time for us.

As soon as we unloaded them and their gear, we roared off with the charter to Shir tucked away in Colin's pocket.

We landed in Chicago, where we took every cent out of our accounts, borrowed some from the few friends we could find who would lend it to us, and spent a hectic twenty-four hours buying mining equipment and books on mining law and property ownership regulations. So far, legally, we hadn't done anything wrong. There is no law against repeating a rumor.

Later, broke but happy, we refueled and headed back to Shir.

I never regretted having such a slow rocket ship as much as I did on the way back. The time it took to make the trip was long enough for one of the modern spaceliners to make three round trips.

Colin hit the old nail on the head on the journey when he added things up.

"It will take us just one month to establish our claim, get one of the big mining companies interested, and see about government approval. Just one month and we'll have enough money to loll around Venus or Earth for the rest of our lives. Now isn't that worth one month."

I said it sure was. And it would have been if things had worked out a little differently, like not finding that probe rocket from Earth with Ministry of Fission insignia on its side.

It had arrived in Shir about

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a day before we did, which means it probably left Earth two to three weeks after us, considering the speed of these little government jobs.

We saw the ship as we descended. Colin landed us beside it. We figured maybe the government had gotten on to the uranium here somehow and were going to claim it freehold. Colin took the charter from his pocket and held it firmly as we strode over to the probe ship.

"What are you guys doing here?" Colin asked their captain.

"What are you doing here?" the captain wanted to know.

"We own this planet," I said.

"Oh, you're the colonists." He turned to a lieutenant next to him. "Leave it to the colonel to get things all balled up. The way he told it to me the Ministry of Colonies already brought all the colonists home."

He turned back to us. "Look, I'm very sorry but we didn't realize anyone was still here. All your friends are on Earth and they have been reimbursed for having to leave their homes and land. Paid quite well, too, and the government has thrown in a free charter and transportation to a new planet besides. I don't know how you fellows were overlooked."

"Well," Colin said, "we . . . we were away getting some supplies."

"Mmm, too bad," the captain said with an air of brisk efficiency. "I'm afraid you'll have to turn around and head back to Earth. But don't worry. You will be paid for it and the compensation will be adequate."

"Paid?" I asked.

The captain smiled cheerfully. "Yes, you know, the usual thing, compensation based on the length of stay here, the amount of building you've done and crops you've planted."

"But what is this all about?" I asked.

"I guess you don't know yet," he said. "It's all confusion as usual in the Fission Ministry. Never tell anyone anything. I have a hunch the colonel didn't even know himself about this place being turned into a new nuclear slag dump until he heard about it from the Ministry of Colonies."

He looked around. "It seems a shame to pick this planet. It looks like the sort of spot someone could do something with."

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(Continued from page 31)

"That makes us your slaves, does it not?"

"What do you take in return?"

"Ah, hah!" the voice fairly barked. "Quid pro quo! You are, indeed, our slaves as well. We are tied to each other by a bond of mutual slavery that cannot be broken—never could be."

"It is very simple once you understand it," Joao's father said.

"Understand what?"

"Some of our kind once lived in greenhouses and their cells remembered the experience," rumbled the voice. "You know about greenhouses, of course?" It turned to look out at the cave mouth where dawn was beginning to touch the world with grey. "That out there, that is a greenhouse, too." Again, it looked down at Joao, the giant eyes glaring. "To sustain life, a greenhouse must achieve a delicate balance—enough of this chemical, enough of that one, another substance available when needed. What is poison one day can be sweet food the next."

"What's all this to do with slavery?" Joao demanded.

"Life has developed over millions of years in this greenhouse we call Earth," the voice rumbled. "Sometimes it developed in the poison excrement of other life . . . and then that poison became necessary to it. Without a substance produced by the wireworm, that savannah grass out there would die . . . in time. Without substances produced by . . . insects, your kind of life would die. Sometimes, just a faint trace of the substance is needed, such as the special copper compound produced by the arachnids. Sometimes, the substance must subtly change each time before it can be used by a life form at the end of the chain. The more different forms of life there are, the more life the greenhouse can support. This is the lesson of the greenhouse. The successful greenhouse must grow many times many forms of life. The more forms of life it has, the healthier it is."

"You're saying we have to stop killing insects," Joao said. "You're saying we have to let you take over."

"We say you must stop killing yourselves," rumbled the voice. "Already, the Chinese are . . . I believe you would call it: *reinfesting* their land. Perhaps they will be in time, perhaps not. Here, it is not too late. There . . . they were fast and thorough . . . and they may need help."

"You . . . give us no proof," Joao said.

"There will be time for proof, later," said the voice. "Now, join your woman friend outside; let the sun work on your skin and the chlorophyll in your blood, and when you come back, tell me if the sun is your slave."

THE END

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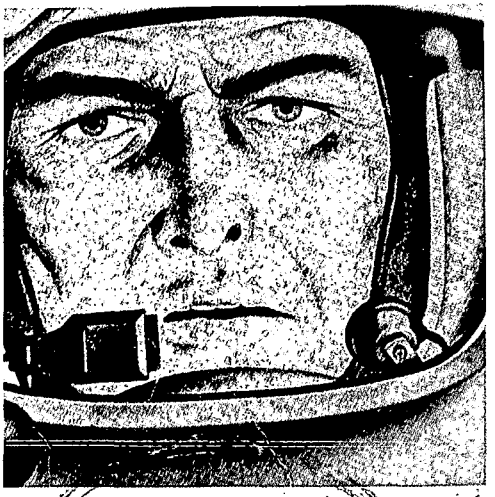

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